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Mystery Magazine

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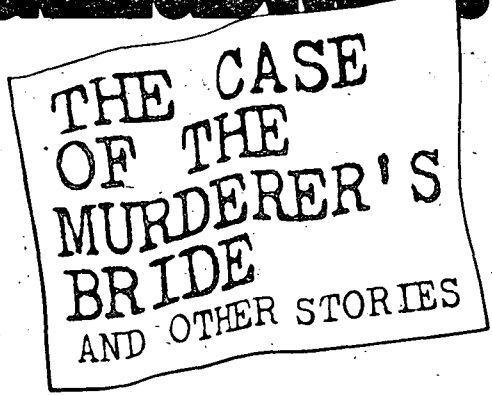

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ALL IN THE WAY YOU READ IT

by ISAAC ASIMOV

When Tom Trumbull arrived—late, of course—at the Black Widowers banquet and called for his Scotch and soda, he was met by James Drake, the organic chemist, who was wearing a rather hangdog expression on his face.

Drake's head made a gentle gesture to one side.

Trumbull followed him, unpeeling his coat as he went, his tanned and furrowed face asking the question before his voice did. "What's up?" he said.

Drake held his cigarette so that the smoke curled bluely upward. "Tom, I've brought a physicist as my guest."

"So?"

"Well, he has a problem and I think it's up your alley."

"A code?"

"Something like that. Numbers, anyway. I don't have all the details. I suppose we'll get those after the dinner. But that's not the point. Will you help me if it becomes necessary to hold down Jeff Avalon?"

Trumbull looked across the room to where Avalon, the patent attorney, was standing in staid conversation with the man who was clearly the guest of the evening since he was the only stranger present.

"What's wrong with Jeff?" said Trumbull. There didn't seem anything wrong with Avalon, who was standing straight and tall as always, looking as though he might splinter if he relaxed. His

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graying mustache and small beard were as neat and trim as ever and he wore the careful smile on his face that he insisted on using for strangers. "He looks all right."

Drake said, "You weren't here last time. Jeff has the idea that the meetings of the Black Widowers are becoming too much of a puzzle-session every month."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Trumbull, as he passed his hands over his tightly waved off-white hair to press down the slight disarray that the wind outside had caused.

"Jeff thinks we ought to be a purely social organization—convivial conversation and all that."

"We have that anyway."

"So when the puzzle comes up, help me sit on him if he gets grouchy. You have a loud voice and I don't."

"No problem. Have you talked to Manny?"

"Hell, no. He'd take up the other side just to be contrary."

"You may be right. —Henry!" Trumbull waved his arm. "Henry, do me a favor. This Scotch and soda won't be enough. It's cold outside and it took me a long time to get a taxi."

Henry smiled, his unlined face looking twenty years younger than his actual sixty-ishness. "I had assumed that might be so, Mr. Trumbull. Your second is ready."

"Henry, you're a diamond of the first water." — Which, to be sure, was a judgment concurred in by all the Black Widowers.

"I'll give you a demonstration," said Emanuel Rubin, the writer. He had quarreled with the soup which, he maintained, had a shade too much leek in it to make it fit for human consumption, and the fact that he was in a clear minority of one rendered him all the more emphatic in his remaining views. "I'll show you that any language is really a complex of languages. —I'll write a word on each of these two pieces of paper. The same word. I'll give one to you, Mario, and one to you, sir."

The second went to Dr. Samuel Puntsch, who had, as was usually the case with guests of the Black Widowers, maintained a discreet silence during the preliminaries.

Puntsch, who was a small slim man dressed in a funereal color scheme that would have done credit to Avalon, looked at the paper and lifted his eyebrows.

Rubin said, "Now neither of you say anything. Just write down the number of the

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syllable that carries the stress."

Mario Gonzalo, the Black Widowers' artist member, had just completed a sketch of Dr. Puntsch, and he laid it to one side. He looked at the word on the paper before him, wrote a number without hesitation, and passed it to Rubin. Dr. Puntsch did the same.

Rubin said, with indescribable satisfaction, "I'll spell the word. It's u-n-i-o-n-i-z-e-d, and Mario says it's accented on the first syllable."

"*Yoo*-nionized," said Mario. "Referring to an industry whose working forces have been organized into a labor union."

Dr. Puntsch laughed. "Yes, I see what you mean. I called it un-*eye*-onized—referring to a substance that did not break down into ions in solution. I accent the second syllable."

"Exactly. The same word to the eye, but different to men in different fields. Roger and Jim, being scientists, would agree with Dr. Puntsch, and Tom, Jeff, and Henry would probably agree with Mario. It's like that in a thousand different places. Fugue means different things to a psychiatrist and a musician. The phrase 'to press a suit' means one thing to a Nineteenth Century lover and another to a Twentieth Century tailor. No two people have exactly the same language."

Roger Halsted, the mathematician, said with the slight hesitation that was almost a stammer, "There's enough overlap so that it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Most of us can understand each other, yes," said Rubin querulously, "but there's less overlap than there ought to be. Every small segment of the culture develops its own vocabulary for the sake of forming an in-group. There are a million verbal walls behind which fools cower, and it does more to create ill-feeling—"

"That was Shaw's thesis in *Pygmalion*," growled Trumbull.

"No; you're quite wrong, Tom. Shaw thought it was the result of faulty education. I say it's *deliberate* and that this does more to create the proper atmosphere for world collapse than war does." And he tackled his roast beef with a fierce cut of his knife.

"Only Manny could go from unionized to the destruction of civilization in a dozen sentences," said Gonzalo, and passed his sketch to Henry for delivery to Dr. Puntsch.

Puntsch smiled a little shakily at it for it had emphasized his ears more than a purist might have thought consistent with good looks. Henry put it on the wall with the other sketches

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It was, perhaps inevitable that the discussion veer from the iniquities of private language to word puzzles and Halsted achieved a certain degree of silence over the dessert by demanding to know the English word whose meaning and pronunciation changed when it was capitalized. Then, when all had given up, Halsted said slowly, "I would say that 'polish' becomes 'Polish,' right?"

Avalon frowned portentously, his luxuriant eyebrows hunching over his eyes. "At least that isn't as offensive as the usual Polish jokes I can't avoid hearing sometimes."

Drake said, his small gray mustache twitching, "We'll try something a little more complicated after the coffee."

Avalon darted a suspicious glance in the direction of Dr. Puntsch and, with a look of melancholy on his face, watched Henry pour the coffee.

Henry said, "Brandy, sir?"

Puntsch looked up, and said, "Why, yes, thank you. That was a very good meal, waiter."

"I am glad you think so," said Henry. "The Black Widowers are a special concern of this establishment."

Drake was striking his water glass with a spoon.

He said, trying to elevate his always fuzzily-hoarse voice, "I've asked Sam Puntsch here partly because he once worked for the same firm I work for out in New Jersey, though not in the same department. He doesn't know a damn thing about organic chemistry; I know that because I heard him discuss the subject once. On the other hand, he's a pretty fair-to-middling physicist. I've also asked him here because he's got a problem and I told him to come down and entertain us with it, and I hope, Jeff, you have no objections."

Geoffrey Avalon twirled his brandy glass gently between two fingers and said grimly, "There are no bylaws in this organization, Jim, so I'll go along with you and try to enjoy myself. But I must say I would like to relax on these evenings; though perhaps it's just the old brain calcifying."

"Well, don't worry, we'll let Tom be griller-in-chief."

Puntsch said, "If Mr. Avalon—"

Drake said at once, "Pay no attention to Mr. Avalon."

And Avalon himself said, "Oh, it's all right, Dr. Puntsch. The group is kind enough to let me pout on occasion."

Trumbull scowled and said, "Will you all let me get on with it? Dr. Puntsch, how do you justify your existence?"

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"Justify it? I suppose you could say that trying to have our civilization last for longer than a generation is a sort of justification."

"What does this trying consist of?"

"An attempt to find a permanent, safe, and nonpolluting source of energy."

"What kind?"

"Fusion energy. Are you going to ask me for details?"

Trumbull shook his head. "No, unless they're germane to the problem that's disturbing you."

"Only tangentially; which is good." Puntsch's voice was reedy, and his words were meticulously pronounced as though he had at one time had ambitions to become a radio announcer. He said, "Actually, Mr. Rubin's point was a rather good one earlier in the evening. We all do have our private language, sometimes more so than is necessary, and I would not welcome the chance to have to go into great detail on the matter of fusion."

Gonzalo, who was wearing complementing tones of red and therefore dominated the table visually even more than usual, muttered, "I wish people would stop saying that Rubin is right."

"You want them to lie?" demanded Rubin, head thrown up at once, his sparse beard bristling.

"Shut up, you two," said Trumbull. "Dr. Puntsch, let me tell you what I know about fusion energy and you stop me if I'm too far off base. It's a kind of nuclear energy produced when you force small atoms to combine into larger ones. You use heavy hydrogen out of the ocean, fuse it to helium, and produce energy that will last us for many millions of years."

"Yes, it's roughly as you say."

"But we don't have it yet, do we?"

"As of today, no."

"Why not, Doctor?"

"Ah, Mr. Trumbull, I take it you don't want a two-hour lecture."

"No, sir, how about a two-minute lecture?"

Puntsch laughed. "About two minutes is all anyone will sit still for. The trouble is we have to heat up our fuel to a minimum temperature of forty-five million degrees centigrade, which is about eighty million fahrenheit. Then we have to keep the fusion fuel—heavy hydrogen, as you say, plus tritium which is a particularly heavy variety—at that temperature long enough for it to catch fire, so to speak, and we must keep it all in place with strong

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magnetic fields while this is happening.

"So far, we can't get the necessary temperature produced quickly enough, or hold the magnetic field in being long enough for the fusion fuel to ignite. Delivering energy by laser may be the best bet but we need stronger lasers than we have so far, plus stronger and better designed magnetic fields than we now have. Once we manage it and *do* ignite the fuel, it will be a breakthrough, but God knows there will remain plenty of engineering problems to solve before we can actually begin to run the Earth by fusion energy."

Trumbull said, "When do you think we'll get to that first breakthrough? When do you think we'll have ignition?"

"It's hard to say. American and Soviet physicists have been inching toward it for a quarter of a century. I think they've almost reached it. Five years more maybe. But there are imponderables. A lucky intuition might bring it this year. Unforeseen difficulties may carry us into the Twenty-first Century."

Halstead broke in, "Can we wait till the Twenty-first Century?"

"Wait?" said Puntsch.

"You say you are trying to have our civilization last more than a generation. That sounds as though you don't think we can wait for the Twenty-first Century."

"I see. I wish I could be optimistic on this point, sir," said Puntsch gravely, "but I can't. At the rate we're going, our petroleum will be pretty much used up by the year 2000. Going back to coal will present us with a lot of problems and leaning on breeder fission reactors will involve getting rid of enormous quantities of radioactive wastes. I would certainly feel uncomfortable if we don't end up with working fusion reactors by, say, 2010."

"'After us, the deluge,'" said Avalon.

Puntsch said, with a trace of acerbity, "The deluge may well come after our time, Mr. Avalon. Do you have any children?"

Avalon, who had two children and three grandchildren, looked uncomfortable and said, "But fusion energy may stave off the deluge and I take it your feelings about the arrival of fusion are optimistic."

"Yes, there I tend to be optimistic."

Trumbull said, "Well, let's get on with it. You're working at Jim Drake's firm. I always thought of that as a big drug-supply house."

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"It's a hell of a lot more than that," said Drake, looking dolefully at what was left of a cigarette package as though wondering whether he ought to light another one or refrain for ten minutes

Puntsch said, "Jim works in the organic chemistry department I work on plasma physics."

Rubin said, "I was down there once, visiting Jim, and took a tour of the plant. I didn't see any Tokamaks."

"What's a Tokamak?" asked Gonzalo at once

Puntsch said, "It's a device within which stable magnetic fields pretty stable anyway can be set up to confine the super hot gas No, we don't have any. We're not doing anything of that sort. We're more or less at the theoretical end of it. When we think up something that looks hopeful, we have arrangements with some of the large installations that will allow it to be tried out."

Gonzalo said, "What's in it for the firm?"

"We're allowed to do some basic research. There's always use for it. The firm produces fluorescent tubes of various sorts and anything we find about the behavior of hot gases—plasma, it's called—and magnetic fields may always help in the production of cheaper and better fluorescents. That's the practical justification of our work."

Trumbull said, "And have you come up with anything that looks hopeful? In fusion, I mean, not in fluorescents."

Puntsch began a smile and let it wipe off slowly. "That's exactly it. I don't know."

Halsted placed his hand on the pink area of baldness in the forepart of his skull and said, "Is that the problem you've brought us?"

"Yes," said Puntsch.

"Well, then, Doctor, suppose you tell us about it."

Puntsch cleared his throat and pursed his lips for a moment, looking around at the men at the banquet table and leaning to one side in order to allow Henry to refill his coffee cup

"Jim Drake," he said, "has explained that everything said in this room is confidential; that everyone"—his eyes rested briefly on Henry—"is to be trusted. I'll speak freely, then. I have a colleague working at the firm. His name is Matthew Revsof and Drake knows him."

Drake nodded "Met him at your house once"

Puntsch said, "Revsof is halfway between brilliance and madness, which is sometimes a good thing for a theoretical

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physicist. It means, though, that he's erratic and difficult to deal with at times. We've been good friends, mostly because our wives have gotten along particularly well. It became one of those family things where the children on both sides use us almost interchangeably as parents, since we have houses on the same block.

"Revsof is now in the hospital. He's been there two months. It's a mental hospital and he had a violent episode that put him into it, but there's no point in going into the details of that. However, the hospital is in no hurry to let him go and that creates a problem.

"I went to visit him about a week after he had been hospitalized. He seemed perfectly normal, perfectly cheerful; I brought him up to date on some of the work going on in the department and he had no trouble following me. But then he wanted to speak to me privately. He insisted the nurse leave and that the door be closed.

"He swore me to secrecy and told me he knew exactly how to design a Tokamak in such a way as to produce a totally stable magnetic field that would contain a plasma of moderate densities indefinitely. He said something like this: 'I worked it out last month. That's why I'm here. Naturally, the Soviets saw to it. The material is in my home safe—the diagrams, the theoretical analysis, everything.'"

Rubin, who had been listening with an indignant frown, interrupted. "Is that possible? Is he the kind of man who could do that? Was the work at the stage where such an advance—"

Puntsch smiled wearily. "How can I answer that? The history of science is full of revolutionary advances that required small insights that anyone might have had, but that, in fact, only one person did have. I'll tell you this, though. When someone in a mental hospital tells you he has something that has been eluding the cleverest physicists in the world for nearly thirty years, and that the Russians are after him, you don't have a very great tendency to believe it. All I tried to do was soothe him.

"But my efforts to do that just excited him. He told me he planned to have the credit for it; he wasn't going to have anyone stealing priority while he was in the hospital. I was to stand guard over the home safe and make sure no one broke in. He was sure Russian spies would try to arrange a break-in and he kept saying over and

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over again that I was the only one he could trust and as soon as he got out of the hospital he would announce the discovery and prepare a paper so that he could protect his priority. He said he would give me coauthorship. Naturally, I agreed to everything just to keep him quiet and got the nurse back in as soon as I could."

Halsted said, "American and Soviet scientists are cooperating in fusion research, aren't they?"

"Yes, of course," said Puntsch. "The Tokamak itself is of Soviet origin The business of Russian spies is just Revsof's overheated imagination."

Rubin said, "Have you visited him since?"

"Quite a few times. He sticks to his story It bothers me. I don't believe him I think he's mad. And yet something inside me says What if he isn't? What if there's something in his home safe that the whole world would give its collective eyeteeth for?"

Halsted said, "When he gets out—"

Puntsch said, "It's not that easy. Any delay is risky This is a field in which many minds are eagerly busy On any particular day someone else may make Revsof's discovery assuming that Revsof has really made one and he will then lose priority and credit, and for all I know, a Nobel Prize. And to take the broader view, the firm will lose a considerable amount of reflected credit and the chance at a substantial increase in its prosperity. Every employee of the firm will lose the chance of benefiting from whatever prosperity-increase the firm might have experienced So you see, gentlemen, I have a personal stake in this, and so has Jim Drake, for that matter.

"But even beyond that The world is in a race it may not win Even if we do get the answer to a stable magnetic field, there will be a great deal of engineering to work through, as I said before, and, at the very best, it will be years before fusion energy is really available to the world years we might not be able to afford In that case, it isn't safe to lose any time waiting for Revsof to get out."

Gonzalo said, "If he's getting out soon—"

"But he *isn't* That's the worst of it," said Puntsch. "He may never come out He's deteriorating fast."

Avalon said in his deep solemn voice, "I take it, sir, that you have explained the advantages of prompt action to your friend."

"Yes, I have," said Puntsch. "I've explained it as carefully as

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I could. I said we would open the safe before legal witnesses and bring everything to him for his personal signature. We would leave the originals after making copies. I explained what he himself might possibly lose by delay. All that happened was that he well, in the end he attacked me I've been asked not to visit him again till further notice."

Gonzalo said, "What about his wife? Does she know anything about this? You said she was a good friend of your wife's."

"So she is. She's a wonderful girl and she understands perfectly the difficulty of the situation She agrees that the safe should be opened."

"Has she talked to her husband?" asked Gonzalo

Puntsch hesitated. "Well, no. She hasn't been allowed to see him He -he This is ridiculous, but I can't help it He claims Barbara, his wife, is in the pay of the Soviet Union. Frankly, it was Barbara whom he- when he was put in the hospital"

"All right," said Trumbull gruffly, "but can't you get Revsof declared incompetent and have the control of the safe transferred to his wife?"

"First, that's a complicated thing. Barbara would have to testify to a number of things she doesn't want to testify to. She -she loves the man."

Gonzalo said, "I don't want to sound ghoulish, but you said that Revsof is deteriorating fast. If he does- "

"Deteriorating mentally, not physically He's only thirty-eight years old and could live thirty more years and be mad every day of it."

"Eventually, won't his wife be forced to request that he be declared incompetent?"

Puntsch said, "But when will that be? And besides, all this still isn't the problem I want to present I had explained to Barbara exactly how I would go about protecting Matthew's priority. I would open the safe and Barbara would initial and date every piece of paper in it I would photocopy it all and give her a notarized statement to the effect that I had done this and that I acknowledged that everything I removed was Revsof's work, and his alone The originals and the notarized statement would be returned to the safe and I would work with the copies.

"You see, she had told me at the very start that she had the combination. It was a matter of first overcoming my own feeling that I was betraying a trust, and secondly, overcoming her scruples I didn't like it but I felt I was serving a higher cause and in the end Barbara

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agreed We decided that if Revsof was ever sane enough to come home, he would agree we had done the right thing. And his priority *would* be protected "

Trumbull said, "I take it you opened the safe, then "

"No," said Puntsch, "I didn't I tried the combination Barbara gave me and it didn't work The safe is still locked "

Halsted said, "You could blow it open."

Puntsch said, "I can't bring myself to do that. It's one thing to be given the combination by the man's wife. It's another to "

Halsted shook his head "I mean, can't Mrs Revsof ask that it be blown open?"

Puntsch said, "I don't think she would ask that. It would mean bringing in outsiders, and it might destroy the contents. But why doesn't the combination work? *That's* the problem "

Trumbull put his hands on the table and leaned forward "Dr Puntsch, are you asking us to answer that question? To tell you how to use the combination you have?"

"Yes "

"Do you have the combination with you?"

"You mean the actual slip of paper that has the combination written on it? No. Barbara keeps that and I see her point However, if you want it written down, that's no problem. I remember it well enough." He brought out a little notebook from his inner jacket pocket, tore off a sheet of paper, and wrote rapidly. "There it is "

12R 27 15

Trumbull glanced at it solemnly, then passed the paper to Halsted on his left It made the rounds and came back to him.

Trumbull folded his hands and stared solemnly at the bit of paper. He said, "How do you know this is the combination to the safe?"

"Barbara says it is "

"Doesn't it seem unlikely to you, Dr. Puntsch, that the man you described would leave the combination lying about? With the combination available he might as well have an unlocked safe. This row of symbols may have nothing to do with the safe "

Puntsch sighed. "That's not the way of it. It isn't as though the safe ever had anything of intrinsic value in it There's nothing of great intrinsic value in Revsof's house altogether, or in mine, for that matter. We're not rich and we're not very subject to burglary. Revsof got the safe about five years ago and had it installed to keep

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papers in. He had this fetish about losing priority even then, but it wasn't till recently that it reached the point of paranoia. He simply made a note of the combination for his own use so he wouldn't lock himself out.

"Barbara came across it one day and asked what it was and he said that it was the combination to his safe. She said, 'Well, don't leave it lying around,' and she put it in a little envelope in one of her desk drawers feeling he might need it someday. He never did, apparently, and I'm sure he must have forgotten all about it But she didn't forget, and she's certain it has never been disturbed."

Rubin said, "But he might have had the combination changed."

"That would have meant a locksmith in the house Barbara says she's sure it never happened."

Trumbull said, "Is that all that was written on the page just six numbers and a letter of the alphabet?"

"That's all."

"What about the back of the sheet?"

"Nothing."

Trumbull said, "You understand, Dr. Puntsch, this isn't a code, and I'm not an expert on combination locks. What does the lock look like?"

"Very ordinary. I'm sure Revsof could not afford a really fancy safe. There's a dial with numbers around it from one to thirty, and a knob with a little pointer in the middle. Barbara has seen Matthew at the safe and there's no great shakes to it. He turns the knob and pulls it open."

"She's never done that herself?"

"No. She says she hasn't."

"She can't tell you why the safe doesn't open when you use the combination?"

"No, she can't. And yet it seems straightforward enough. Most of the combination locks I've dealt with—all of them, in fact—have knobs that you turn first in one direction, then in the other, then back in the first direction again. It seems clear to me that according to the combination, I should turn the knob to the right till the pointer is at twelve, then left to twenty-seven, then right again to fifteen."

Trumbull said thoughtfully, "I can't see that it could mean anything else."

"But it doesn't work," said Puntsch. "I turned twelve, twenty-seven, fifteen a dozen times I did it carefully, making sure the little pointer was exactly centered on each line I tried making extra turns you know, right to twelve, then left

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one full turn and then to twenty-seven, then right one full turn and then to fifteen. I tried making one full turn in one direction and not in the other. I tried every trick I could think of, jiggling the knob, pressing it, everything."

Gonzalo said, grinning, "Did you say 'Open Sesame'?"

"It didn't occur to me to do so," said Puntsch, not grinning, "but if it had, believe me I would have tried it. Barbara says she never noticed him do anything special, but, of course, it could have been something unnoticeable, and for that matter she didn't watch him too closely. It wouldn't occur to her that she'd have to know someday."

Halsted said, "Let me look at that again." He stared at the combination. "This is only a copy, Dr. Puntsch. This can't be exactly the way it looked. You might be copying it as you *thought* it was. Isn't it possible that some of the numbers in the original might be equivocal—so that you could have mistaken a seven for a one, for instance?"

"No, no," said Puntsch, shaking his head vigorously. "There's no chance of a mistake in the numbers, I assure you."

"What about the spaces?" said Halsted. "Was it spaced exactly like that?"

Puntsch reached for the paper and looked at it again. "Oh, I see what you mean. No, as a matter of fact, there were no spaces. I put them in because that was how I think of it. Actually the original is a solid line of symbols. It doesn't matter though, does it? You can't divide it any other way. I'll write it down for you without spaces." He wrote a second time under the first and shoved it across the table to Halsted.

12R2715

He said, "You can't divide it any other way. You can't have a 271 or 715. The numbers don't go higher than thirty."

"Well now," muttered Halsted. "Never mind the numbers. What about the letter R?" He licked his lips, obviously enjoying the clear atmosphere of suspense now centered on him. "Suppose we divide the combination this way." And he wrote:

12 R27 15

He held it up for Puntsch to see, and then for the others. "In this division, it's the twenty-seven which would have the sign for 'right,' so the two other numbers that turn left. In other words, the numbers are twelve, twenty-seven, and fifteen all right, but you turn left, right,

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left, instead of right, left, right."

Gonzalo protested. "Why put the R there?"

Halsted said, "All he needs is the minimum reminder. He knows what the combination is. If he reminds himself the middle number is right, he knows the other two are left."

Gonzalo said, "But that's no big deal. If he just puts down the three numbers, it's either left, right, left, or else it's right, left, right. If one doesn't work, he tries the other. Maybe the R stands for something else."

"I can't think what," said Dr. Puntsch gloomily.

Halsted said, "The symbol couldn't be something other than an R, could it, Dr. Puntsch?"

"Absolutely not," said Puntsch. "I'll admit I didn't think of associating the R with the second number, but that doesn't matter anyway. When the combination wouldn't work right, left, right, I was desperate enough not only to try it left, right, left; but right, right, right and left, left, left. In every case I tried it with and without complete turns in between. Nothing worked."

Gonzalo said, "Why not try all the combinations? There can only be so many."

Rubin said, "Figure out how many, Mario. The first number can be anything from one to thirty in either direction; so can the second; so can the third. The total number of possible combinations, if any direction is allowed for any number, is sixty times sixty times sixty, or over two hundred thousand. And that doesn't allow for extra turns."

"I think I'd be willing to blow it open before I try them all," said Puntsch.

Trumbull turned to Henry, who had been standing at the sideboard, an intent expression on his face. "Have you been following all this, Henry?"

Henry said, "Yes, sir, but I haven't actually seen the figures."

Trumbull said, "Do you mind, Dr. Puntsch? He's the best man here, actually." He handed over the slip with the numbers written in three different ways.

Henry studied them gravely and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I had had a thought, but I see I'm wrong."

"What was the thought?" asked Trumbull.

"It had occurred to me that the letter R might have been in the small form. I see it's a capital."

Puntsch looked astonished. "Wait, wait. Henry, does it matter?"

"It might, sir. We don't

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often think it does, but Mr. Halsted explained earlier in the evening that 'polish' becomes 'Polish,' changing the meaning and pronunciation simply because of the capitalization."

Puntsch said slowly, "But you know, it *is* a small letter in the original. It never occurred to me to reproduce it that way. I always use capitals when I print. How odd."

There was a faint smile on Henry's face. He said, "Would you write the combination with a small letter, sir?"

Puntsch, flushing slightly, wrote:

12r2715

Henry looked at it and said, "As long as it is a small 'r,' I can now ask another question. Are there any other differences between this and the original?"

"No," said Puntsch. Then, defensively, "No significant differences. The matter of the spacing and the capitalization hasn't changed anything, has it? Of course, the original isn't in my handwriting."

Henry said quietly, "Is it in anyone's handwriting, sir?"

"What?"

"I mean, is the original typewritten, Dr. Puntsch?"

Dr. Puntsch's flush deepened. "Yes, now that you ask, it *was* typewritten. That doesn't mean anything, either. If there were a typewriter here I would typewrite it for you, though, of course, it might not be the same make of typewriter that typed out the original."

Henry said, "There's a typewriter in the office on this floor. Would you care to type it, Dr. Puntsch?"

"Certainly," said Puntsch. He was back in three minutes, during which time not one word was said by anyone at the table. He presented the paper to Henry, with the typewritten line under the four lines of handwritten ones:

12r2715

Henry said, "Is this the way it looked? The typewriter that did the original did not have a particularly unusual typeface?"

"No, it didn't. What I have typed looks just like the original."

Henry passed the paper to Trumbull, who looked at it and passed it on.

Henry said, "If you open the safe, you are very likely to find nothing of importance, I suppose."

"I suppose it, too," snapped Puntsch. "I'm almost sure of it. It will be disappointing but much better than to keep on wondering."

"In that case, sir," said Henry, "I would like to remind you that Mr. Rubin spoke of

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private languages early in the evening. The typewriter has a private language, too. The standard typewriter uses the same symbol for the numeral one and the small form of the twelfth letter of the alphabet.

"If you wanted, in handwriting, to abbreviate 'left' and 'right' by the initial letters, there would be no problem, since neither form of the handwritten letter is confusing. If you used a typewriter and abbreviated it in capitals, it would also be clear. Using small letters, it is possible to read the combination as 12 right, 27, 15; or possibly 12, right 27, 15; or, as *left* 2, right 27, *left* 5. The 1 in 12 and 15 is not the numeral 1, but the small version of the letter L and it stands for left. Revsof knew what he was typing and it didn't confuse him. But it could confuse others. It's all in the way you read it."

Puntsch looked at the symbols open-mouthed. "How did I miss that?"

Henry said, "You spoke, earlier, of insights that anyone might have, but that only one actually does have. It was Mr. Gonzalo who had the key."

"I?" said Gonzalo, puzzled.

"Mr. Gonzalo wondered why there should be only one letter," said Henry, "and it seemed to me he was right. Revsof would surely indicate the letters for both directions, or for neither. Since one direction was unquestionably present, I wondered if the other might not be also. And I simply looked for it."

CRIMINALIMERICK

THE BLACK WIDOWERS: 5

by D. R. BENSEN

The Black Widowers' chiefest delight
Is the stories their guests will recite,
Which rival each month
The Tales of the One Th-
Ousand Nights (as it's called) *and a Night.*

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a *NEW* L-and-L story by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Another con caper by the L-and-L boys—Lang the outside man who has a positive genius for picking suckers, and Lovell the inside man who has a positive genius for copying a painting "by any artist living or dead and do it so well that the original artist himself would be hard put to say it wasn't the real thing." That was the secret of Lang's salesmanship—"honest" merchandise. . .

THE SWITCHEROO

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Cardwell leaned back in his chair behind the massive desk and carefully folded his hands over his ample stomach.

"I'm not sure I quite understand what your business is, Mr. Lang," he said. "Just what is it you want me to do?"

"Actually," I said, "it's more a case of my doing something for you."

Cardwell raised his eyebrows questioningly. "Mr. Lang," he said, "it took considerable effort on your part to get in to see me. And it's been my experience that people seldom go to that much trouble unless they see some advantage to themselves."

"Oh," I said, "of course. But what's wrong with that? As long as we both end up with something we want."

Cardwell permitted a bleak smile to play across his lips. "Not a thing," he said. "I assume what you want is money. Which I have. But what is it that *you* have that you think I might want?"

"A painting," I said.

Cardwell shook his head. "I already have paintings, Mr. Lang," he said. "All I could reasonably want."

"Not quite," I said. "Some months ago you tried to buy a Van Erl Madonna to round out your collection of Seventeenth

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Century masters. You almost had it too, but then at the last minute it was sold out to a higher bidder. That's the painting I meant. Because if you still want it, I can get it for you. And for considerably less than you offered for it the first time around."

Cardwell dropped his pose of tolerant amusement and leaned forward to eye me grimly. "Morgan Reeves sent you, didn't he?" he said at last. "I was pretty sure he was overextending himself when he bought that painting away from me. And now he's got to get out from under, doesn't he? Well, he crossed me too many times in the past for me to be inclined to jump in and save him now. So you go back and tell Mr. Reeves I wouldn't buy from him if he were the last man on earth and if that Van Erl were the last painting."

"That's all very interesting," I said. "But also very much beside the point. Because Morgan Reeves didn't send me. And I never considered *buying* the painting. My plan is to *steal* it."

Cardwell stared at me. "Steal?" he said. Then he threw back his head and laughed harshly. "It seems I misjudged you, Mr. Lang," he said. "You are wasting my time after all."

"Why?" I said. "It wouldn't be the first time one collector stole from another. Of course, if you have moral objections—"

Cardwell shook his head. "Morals have nothing to do with it, Mr. Lang. As a matter of fact, I find the idea of stealing from Morgan Reeves very appealing—for a number of reasons. But, unfortunately, it's impossible. Morgan Reeves has a security system for the protection of his paintings that's the envy of art galleries the world over. You couldn't get within a mile of his collection, let alone hope to steal from it."

"That's right," I agreed. "*I* couldn't. But what if I could produce a man who could? Would you be interested then?"

Cardwell took a deep breath and thought about it for a minute. "That would depend on the man," he said finally, "and whether I believed he could pull it off."

"His name is Walter Evans," I said. "He's Morgan Reeves's curator, and all he has to do is walk in, lift the painting off the wall, then walk out with it. And nobody would question him. It's as simple as that."

"So it is," Cardwell said. "Except why would Evans want to do this?"

I shrugged. "Why do any of us do what we do? His income isn't adequate for his tastes. He

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wants money and this is his way of getting it."

"Then he's a fool," Cardwell said contemptuously. "And you're a bigger one for not realizing it. Don't you know that once that painting was discovered missing, Morgan Reeves would realize it had to be an inside job? And his curator would be the first one suspected. Knowing Reeves, I know the kind of pressure he'd bring to bear, too. Your man would break and he'd lead them right to you—and through you to me."

"No, he wouldn't," I said. "Because, you see, Mr. Cardwell, for the past several years I've worked partners with a man named Lovell. Now, Lovell is a real odd duck in a lot of ways. He won't eat ordinary food like you and me and he's as nervous as your Aunt Nellie at a strip-tease convention. But, offsetting all that, he's an artist with a very real if very specialized talent. He can forge a painting by any artist living or dead and do it so well that the original artist himself would be hard put to say it wasn't the real thing. In fact, the only way you can distinguish Lovell's copies from the original work is by spectroscopic or electro-luminescent examination.

"That's why Evans came to me instead of approaching you directly. So that when he takes Reeves's painting down, he can put a perfect copy in its place." I smiled and shook my head. "There won't be any suspicion or pressure, Mr. Cardwell, because Morgan Reeves will never know he's been robbed—unless you choose to tell him."

Cardwell pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You seem to have covered every conceivable angle, Mr. Lang," he said.

"I find it pays," I said.

"So do I," Cardwell said. "So do I." His lids drooped down to cover his eyes. "How much would you want?"

"$50,000," I said. "Half for Lovell and me, half for Evans."

"Fair enough," Cardwell said. "I offered twice that much when I tried to buy the Madonna legitimately, and God knows how much more Reeves had to pay."

"It's a deal then?" I said.

"Almost, Mr. Lang," Cardwell said. "But there are still a couple of points that have to be cleared up. First, I would have to be convinced in my own mind that this Lovell's work is as good as you say it is—or at least good enough to deceive Morgan Reeves."

"No problem," I said. "I'll bring the copy over for you to inspect when it's completed. I promised Evans he could see it, too."

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"Fine," Cardwell said. "And now for my second point. I would also want some assurances that you weren't simply foisting a copy off on me."

"Oh, I think you can trust us on that score," I said.

Cardwell allowed himself another of those bleak smiles. "Trust is all right in its place, Mr. Lang," he said. "Which may be a boy scout encampment but definitely isn't anywhere large sums of money are involved. Fortunately, however, the problem is not insoluble. It merely requires that a man I designate accompany Evans when he makes the substitution."

He looked over at me blandly, sensing my hesitation. "Does that cause you a problem, Mr. Lang?" he said.

I shrugged. "I don't know," I said. "It wasn't part of the deal I worked out with Evans. So I'll have to check with him to see if he has any objections."

"Do that," Cardwell said. "And if he does, I trust you'll be able to find a way to overcome them. Because if you don't, there is no deal."

And with that he smiled again and pressed the buzzer for his secretary to come in and usher me out.

A second person present when the paintings were switched was a complication I hadn't counted on. But necessity really is the mother of invention, and so I was able to call Cardwell early the following day to tell him his problem had been solved.

"Your problem," he reminded me, "not mine."

"Have it your way," I said, "but whoever's problem it was it's been taken care of. Evans will fake a short in an electrical connection some evening when Reeves is sure to be out and your man can come in disguised as an electrician."

"Hardly original," Cardwell said, "but it will serve. Now when will the copy be ready?"

"In about three weeks," I said.

"Fine," Cardwell said. "I'll look forward to seeing you then."

Actually it was closer to four weeks before I saw Cardwell again. Then I called at his home with a carefully wrapped painting under my arm.

It was late in the evening and Cardwell himself opened the door for me. "I took the precaution of giving the servants the evening off," he explained.

"Good idea," I said. "The fewer possible witnesses the better."

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Cardwell gave me a long dry look. "Precisely," he said and led me back to a small book-lined study where he unwrapped the painting and placed it under a bright fluorescent light to study.

Finally he pushed back his chair and said, "It is an excellent copy."

"Perhaps a better one than you realize," I said. "Evans compared it to the original and he says there isn't a dime's worth of difference between them."

Cardwell looked up at me sharply. "Evans compared them? Were you present?"

"No," I said. "But—"

Cardwell wasn't listening, though. He had bent forward again and was peering intently at the painting.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Perhaps nothing," Cardwell said. He ran his finger along the painting's wooden backing. "Tell me something, Mr. Lang," he said. "Was this copy ever framed?"

"No," I said, "of course not. There's no point in trying to duplicate a frame. It's simpler to pull the frame off the original painting and re-nail it to the copy. Besides, the original frame lends authenticity."

"Exactly," Cardwell said. "But you're wrong about this. It *has* been framed. You can see where nails were driven through the stretcher frame to hold the outer frame in place."

"What?" I said. I took the painting from Cardwell and turned it over. There were eight or nine holes angling through the backs and out the sides of the wooden framing holding the canvas taut where nails had obviously been driven and later withdrawn. "I don't understand this," I said. "This isn't the painting I gave Evans."

"Of course it isn't," Cardwell said. He smiled grimly. "Evans has already made his substitution. This is the original. And what he plans to do while my man watches is put this back in its rightful place while taking down the copy to pass on to me."

"I still don't understand," I said. "What's the point?"

"Think about it for a moment. Morgan Reeves is in financial difficulties. What better way to bail himself out without sacrificing any of his precious collection?"

"I'll be damned," I said. "That creep Evans, I'll wring his neck for him."

"Why be angry, Mr. Lang?" Cardwell said. "We're still both getting what we want. Me the painting and you your $25,000. All I have to do is keep this and pay you."

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"Won't Evans and Reeves cause trouble?" I said.

"They may try," Cardwell said. "But primarily it will be a matter of my word against theirs since I assume by then you and your friend Lovell will be well out of reach. And in any case I doubt they'll push it too far. Otherwise, they may find that they've convicted themselves of conspiracy to defraud." He smiled, genuinely happy for once. "So how about it, Mr. Lang? Is it a deal? A new deal?"

I hesitated, then nodded. "All right," I said. "But no checks. Cash only."

"Of course," Cardwell said. He swung open a section of one bookshelf to reveal a wall safe, opened it, and took out a packet of bills which he handed to me.

I made a quick count to be sure it was all there, then stuck the money in my pocket. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you," I said.

"So it has," he said. "I doubt, however, that it will ever be repeated." He picked up the painting and looked at it fondly. "And now do you think you could find your own way out?"

I said I could and did. Outside, Lovell was waiting for me in the car.

"For God's sakes," he said anxiously, "how did it go?"

"Like a dream, Lovell," I said. "Like a dream."

Lovell sighed and mopped his brow. "I've been so worried," he said. "What if he didn't notice those nail holes?"

"In that case," I said, "I would have found some way of calling them to his attention. However, despite what he says, Cardwell is bound to expect some reaction from Reeves and Evans. And when none is forthcoming, it's going to raise some ugly suspicions in his mind that anybody can drive a nail into a painting to make it look like it's been pulled from its frame. He may even realize that the whole substitution plot and 'doublecross' existed solely in his mind. So I think the smartest thing for us to do is follow Cardwell's advice and be well out of reach well before that happens."

"Q"

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Marie DiGioia's first story—her debut in print—was titled "The Last Contract," and it appeared in the January 1973 issue of EQMM. The story won a high honor—it was chosen by Allen J. Hubin for his annual anthology, BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR—1974.

Miss DiGioia's second story, like her first, is low-keyed and restrained, and for luck we have given it a title similar to her first story's. So far as we know, there has never been a continuity of titles beginning with "The Last"...

THE LAST WORD

by MARIE DiGIOIA

My stepbrother Alex was always top dog. When we were boys back in Brooklyn he was the one the other kids chose as their leader—I was just another follower. The time I nearly got run over by a car while chasing a football, Alex saved me from an early grave by pulling me back safely onto the sidewalk. All through school he captured all the honors and the girls—while I passed by the skin of my teeth and rarely had a date. It wasn't until Alex was awarded a scholarship to a mid-western university and left New York that I relaxed and took a cold hard look at my own future.

I was working in Sealy's Diner on Everett Street which drew a fair-sized business considering how old the joint was—neighborhood shoppers during the day and truckdrivers nights. It wasn't the greatest job, but I'd never been blessed with any particular talent. Except maybe one thing—something I couldn't boast about to anyone. Least of all to my family.

It all started innocently enough during high school when I swiped fruit off Mr. DeMarco's stand just for the thrill of it, and the compulsion reached the point where I could lift classmates' wallets without being caught. Each time the

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fear of being caught was outweighed by the kick I got from knowing I could do something few other guys could.

Soon I was in the habit of pocketing some bills instead of depositing them in the diner's cash register—especially late at night after Sealy had left and I was alone behind the counter. Business then consisted mainly of coffee-and-apple-pie trade and often I didn't bother writing up checks. Then I got too ambitious and tipped my hand.

One afternoon a well-groomed dude in an expensive suit—definitely not our usual clientele—came into the diner. I thought he had stepped inside by mistake, but Sealy went to his table and asked me to bring two coffees. The guy had major-league written all over him—from his diamond rings and cuff links to the flashy convertible at the curb. When he rose to leave I happened to be cleaning off a nearby table and as he brushed by it was easy to use my apron as cover for the fat wallet I lifted from his back pocket.

It wasn't the steam from the grills that made me perspire the rest of the day and even after I got home I was still pretty jumpy. I'd hit the big time, all right—the wallet had more than $500 in cash, neatly divided into packs of 50's and 20's.

I didn't sleep all night. The following day riding the cross-town bus to Sealy's I could feel the butterflies still racing around in my stomach. Everything went along as usual with Sealy grunting orders at me as he always did until all the customers cleared out. Then he quickly moved to the door, put up the *Closed* sign, and locked it.

"Okay, punk," he said quietly, turning to face me with an icy look. "You have until tomorrow morning to return Mr. Munro's wallet—intact."

My heart seemed to stop beating. Angelo Munro was a big man in the local rackets. "I don't know what you're talking about," I lied lamely.

"Refresh your memory, kid—that is if you want to grow up to be a big healthy boy."

Until then I never suspected that Sealy was a front for mob operations. There were rumors from time to time of racetrack bets and numbers being handled by him. But all the while I'd been working the counter, I'd never seen a scrap of paper pass through his hands.

I figured there was no percentage playing coy with the mob. The next day I handed Munro's wallet over to Sealy, intact, expecting to be out of a job. But it didn't happen—if anything, Sealy treated me with

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less contempt than usual.

I learned why a few weeks later when Munro dropped around again. This time he was accompanied by two of his musclemen and walked straight over to me. I had the queasy feeling I was about to have some sense knocked into me. Instead he gave me a big gold-toothed grin.

"I've gotta hand it to you, kid. I didn't know for one second I was being fleeced. Fact is, if this wasn't the only place I stopped into solo that day, I'd never pinned it on you. You planning to flip burgers all your life?"

"No way."

"Come around and see me, then." Munro handed me a business card. "I'm sure there's a spot for a skillful boy like yourself in our organization."

So that's how I got in the mob.

The first two or three years they gave me simple jobs, like being runner for the borough numbers operation and then as a collector from losers who visited the gambling casinos Munro had established throughout the city. I moved into a two-bedroom apartment and waited for the big job to come my way.

When Alex returned to the city he got a job as an executive trainee with a downtown export-import firm, Carr & Wheeler. I seldom ran into him, except at family get-togethers. We had different lifestyles. I still experienced a hot feeling down my back whenever I was exposed to his quick wit and good looks.

Alex had the face of a Roman god, with wavy fair hair and a strong forehead and nose. I was short and dark. I had managed to conceal my underworld connections from the rest of the family, but with Alex it wasn't so easy. He raised an eyebrow the first time he saw me step out of my foreign sportscar.

"They must give great commissions to salesmen these days," he said.

"I manage, even without a college diploma," I quipped. "And I'm not stuck with a dull desk job like all you egghead geniuses."

"I'm glad you're doing so well, Frankie." Again there was that patronizing tone. "But if you ever feel like changing jobs I'll be happy to recommend you to my firm."

I hated him for the smug manner he always used with me. I was itching to tell him everything—how I was a bigger man than he was, sitting safely behind his office desk. But I was bound by the code of

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silence, especially as I'd just been tapped by Munro to become assistant manager at one of his East Side game rooms. It was a step in the right direction, and I had done it all without once getting busted by the fuzz.

Lady luck continued to smile on me—I met Cora. She was the best thing that ever happened to me. Cora was the kind of doll that had class with a capital C—someone a guy in my line of work usually doesn't get a nod from.

She was a dress designer. She'd been raised in a small New England town, but I knew she wanted the same things out of life I did. What I also liked about her was that never during the time we were going together did she pry into my activities, perhaps sensing I would tell her at the right moment.

For over a year I shielded her from knowledge of the organization and from my family. Then one night, as we were entering the Skylab Club, there was Alex sitting at a corner table with a cute redheaded chick. When he spotted us, he came over. By then he was assistant general manager at Carr & Wheeler and traveled often between Europe and the States. I tried to escape with a brief introduction, but he insisted we join him for a drink.

"As I've said before, you're doing very well for yourself, Frankie boy," he said, his eyes appraising Cora. But she paid little attention and it gave me a warm, satisfied feeling that lasted the rest of the night.

When I brought her back to her apartment around 3:00 A.M., I suggested we get married right away. She agreed and the next day we picked up the license and went for blood tests. A week later we tied the knot at City Hall. We spent our honeymoon sunning in Acapulco and while there I sent a postcard to Alex, informing him of my marriage.

It wasn't until after we returned to New York that I received a reply from him—in the form of an overseas airmail letter. He had been transferred to his firm's Paris office and he wrote that he would think of Cora and me every time he strolled down the Champs Elysées with a beautiful girl on his arm.

Things started to go sour three years after Cora and I were married, after we'd moved out of the city and she quit her job. We had bought a large house out in the Hamptons with a swimming pool and a two-car garage. With more time on her hands, Cora decided she wanted to redecorate the house and called in a professional. After his exit we had expensive

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Danish Modern furniture, new drapes and carpeting, a pink harem-like master bedroom—and a staggering bill. Then Cora declared we needed a part-time maid and cook.

In the hope of being accepted by the local social set, Cora threw weekly cocktail parties. While a few nearby inhabitants did show up—mostly out of curiosity—none of them extended return invitations. She placed the blame firmly on me.

"It's all your fault, Frankie—you stand out like a sore thumb," she said. "How can I impress these people if you walk around with a big cigar in your mouth and use poolroom language?"

"Look, baby, this is my house and I'll act and talk the way I like. Besides, we don't need any of these two-bit phonies—we have plenty of friends."

"Oh, honey, how can I make you understand? I don't mind being discreet about your business connections, but I wish you'd try to acquire a little culture just for my sake."

I did try. I let Cora pick out my suits and ties, more conservative and less flashy than those I usually wore. I didn't protest when she asked me to accompany her to art galleries and museums to look at crazy paintings and sculpture. I even escorted her to ballets and concerts and tried very hard to stay awake. But eventually she concluded it was useless trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

What's more, trying to change my image didn't improve our social status one bit. We were still outsiders, and always would be. When Cora finally became resigned to this we went back to entertaining our old friends. She reacted to the snubbing we'd received by hiring more servants and generally flaunting our wealth in our neighbors' faces. And there was something else: the one or two martinis Cora usually had before dinner increased to three or four. On nights I returned home late I found her more than slightly smashed.

In the meantime I hadn't risen in the ranks of the organization as fast as I'd expected. There were always younger and smarter guys waiting to grab the plum spots I was entitled to by virtue of seniority. I had been made manager of the Essex Club, a private club that was a cover for one of the mob's biggest gambling casinos. I felt I should have been put in charge of the state-wide operation. The upkeep of the house and Cora's extravagance were making it difficult for me to meet my bills.

As soon as I took over at the

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Essex, I hit on a plan to keep my head above water. There was only one reason I did it—knowing the risks—and that was because I didn't want to lose Cora. Besides, I didn't feel I owed the mob any special loyalty.

Every night after the casino closed the dealers brought in the day's cash and, along with my assistant Johnny, I tallied up the amount, recorded it in the books, and locked everything in the safe. On Fridays a collector arrived to pick up the weekly take and signed a receipt for the money, after carefully checking to see that it matched the entries in my books. But I managed to get a slice of the action simply by writing down $100 or $200 less in the book each night as Johnny called out the amounts to me. By the end of the week when the organization man came I'd short-changed the mob by skimming off nearly $1000. The books tallied with the amount I handed over, so no one was the wiser.

If Cora knew how far I was sticking my neck out for her she didn't show it. If anything, it seemed we were growing farther apart. Cora developed the habit of driving into the city to visit her mother and then staying in town to have dinner with friends. Between the fear of losing her and the fear of being discovered by the organization I began to wonder what kind of treadmill I was on.

I was feeling particularly low the night I met Alex at one of the local pubs. At first I didn't recognize him—he was sporting a mustache and had grown heavier—but he was still handsome. He was married by now and back in Carr & Wheeler's New York office, and I invited him to the house to have dinner and catch up on the past years.

While we were having coffee, the subject turned to our wives and I felt the impulse to confide in him. Despite my old dislike of him, Alex was far wiser in the ways of women than I could ever be. "I'm sorry Cora isn't here tonight, but things haven't been right between us for some time," I said. "I can't seem to provide enough—or do enough—to make her happy."

Alex gave me a sympathetic look and I asked him about his marriage.

His face brightened into the confident smile I remembered. "Denise and I have two healthy kids, a boy and a girl. We're a happy family."

By the time he left I was again envying him his success and happiness. He was only a year older and he had come from the same background, yet

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our lives had taken completely different turns. It didn't seem fair. Nice guys usually finished last, not first.

The next day there was a phone call from my mother-in-law. Cora had already left for her hairdresser appointment, so the maid handed me the phone. Cora's old lady had never been overjoyed at having me for a son-in-law, but she always played it cool and I did the same.

"Frank, I hate to bother you like this, but I'm worried. Is everything all right? I haven't seen or heard from Cora in weeks."

I tried to swallow the lump that rose in my throat. "Everything's fine. Couldn't be better."

I sat frozen after hanging up the receiver. What a dumb blind fool I'd been! There was only one reason Cora would lie to me about visiting her mother and that reason drove me into a frenzy of anger, followed by a slow sobering burn. I wasn't able to sleep during the next few nights, yet I didn't confront Cora with my suspicions.

The following Monday, shortly after Cora left to drive into the city, I got into my car and followed her, being careful to leave plenty of distance between us so she wouldn't spot me in her rearview mirror. Cora's mother lived in a brownstone in the West 20's, but instead of heading downtown, she cut over toward the East Side, stopping at a towering apartment building at 66th and First. I waited until she stepped out of the car and went inside before parking my car on the opposite side of the street, behind a delivery truck.

I sat there a couple of hours smoking one cigarette after another and scrutinizing everyone who entered or left the building. I itched to get out and take a look at the names in the lobby, but there was a doorman on duty.

Shortly after two o'clock Cora came out, but this time she wasn't alone. Beside her—big as life—was my stepbrother Alex. She was gazing up into his face with a look I hadn't seen in years. They got into her car and headed downtown. This time I didn't bother to follow.

I had never imagined it would be Alex. It was like having an old toothache return. While I despised Cora for her betrayal, I hated Alex even more. All my life he had made me feel second-rate, an also-ran. Now even with all he had, he still wanted what was rightfully mine. I figured it was time to settle up the score between us—in the only way I knew.

The next morning more

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trouble came my way in the form of a summons from Munro. By that time I'd ripped off over $36,000 and I was trying hard not to shake as I walked into his plush-carpeted, soundproofed office.

He wasn't smiling as he motioned me to sit down. Before him were several of my tally books. "Been checking through the Essex Club books for the past few years, Frankie, and something's bothering me. You see, for three years running the Essex has averaged a steady monthly gross, and now it's dipped down by about $4000 or $5000 each month." Munro stared across the desk at me. "Any idea why this is happening, Frankie?"

"Why, no, Mr. Munro." I sat glued to my seat. "We're still averaging the same number of people each night, mostly regular customers. And I haven't been hit with any big winners at the tables."

"Tell you what, Frankie, you investigate this problem on your own for a month or two." He suddenly flashed a wide chilling grin. "Then if you can't come up with the answer, I'll send over one of our accountants to help you find it."

Driving away I could hardly concentrate on the road. I was a condemned man unless I started feeding back what I'd been taking. It didn't cool me any to know that nearly all the money I'd stolen had gone into the furs on Cora's back and the diamond necklaces around her cheating neck.

I thought about her and Alex again—how cool they'd played it a few nights ago when Cora and I went to a party at his house. But then I remembered how Alex insisted on taking me on a tour of the house, boasting as we went through his den that he kept his important papers and cash in a wall safe there. And then I had an idea how I could erase Alex from my life once and for all and save my own skin at the same time.

I stopped at a phone booth and called him. "Do you remember when we were kids and you saved my life?" I asked him. "Well, I need your help again."

There was a silence at the other end, and I knew Alex was sizing up the situation. He had realized long ago that I was connected with the mob. "I know you wouldn't turn to me if there was any other way, Frankie," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"I can't talk over the phone, except to tell you I need bread, lots of it. I have to see you—alone."

"All right, Frankie. On Fri-

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day night my wife and the kids will be visiting her mother. Come by around nine o'clock."

On Friday night I took the .38 from my desk drawer and put it in my coat pocket. It was not unusual on slow nights for me to leave Johnny in charge of the tables, so around 7:30 I told him I'd be cutting out for a while and I left the club by the rear exit. If everything went according to schedule, I would be back well before closing, in time to do the night's tally.

It took me over an hour to get to Alex's house in Greenwich. The big Colonial was set on a hill just off the main highway and I approached it slowly, being careful no one saw me enter the driveway. It was dark except for some lights in the rear where the living room was located.

It seemed an eternity before Alex answered the doorbell. My knees were like jelly as I followed him into the den, dark except for a desk lamp.

It took some time for me to pull myself together and tell him of the bind I was in as a result of tapping the organization till. He listened quietly, then he mixed us both a Scotch and soda.

"You've put your neck in the noose this time, Frankie boy," he commented with a wry smile. "So you figure if you up the ante in the coming weeks, Munro will quit sniffing around? I don't know if it'll work, but it's worth a try."

"Does that mean you'll help me, Alex?" My fingers nervously gripped the .38 in my pocket. "There isn't anyone else I can turn to—who would understand."

"Haven't I always, Frankie boy?" He went around the desk and uncovered the wall safe hidden behind the drapes. "I'll give you what I can, and don't worry about paying me back right away. Just promise you'll never do anything else this stupid."

"You can count on it. I never want to sweat this way again."

"This is the second time I'm saving your hide, Frankie. If the old Chinese saying holds true, I own you twice over." He turned his back to me and started working the safe combination.

I waited until I heard the final click and saw the door of the safe swing open, then I moved quickly forward and hit Alex on the back of the skull with the butt of the revolver. I watched in a kind of daze as he fell to the floor, then it seemed forever till the pulse stopped and he was really dead.

I removed all the cash from

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inside the safe—there was well over $50,000, including several thousand in crisp new $20 and $10 bills—and I stashed it in the drawstring bag I had in my coat pocket. I wiped and replaced the two whiskey glasses and rummaged through the bureau drawers of the bedrooms to make it look like a robbery. With a glasscutter I cut a hole from the outside in a French door of the living room.

It was almost 11:00 when I returned to the club. I parked at the side entrance. I had already locked the bag of money in the car trunk, and before entering the casino from my office I replaced the carefully wiped .38 in the top drawer of my desk. Later when Johnny and I tallied up the night's receipts, I wrote down $100 more than the amounts he read off to me.

The news of Alex's murder apparently by a burglar appeared in the morning editions the next day. Cora didn't come down to breakfast until very late. Her face turned ash-white as she read the front-page story about Alex, then she burst into tears—but I felt no pity for her. I told her to join me in the study as soon as she finished her coffee.

When she came in I got right to the point. "You'll have to change your lifestyle, angel," I said. "You've become a luxury I can't afford. We'll start by returning that emerald bracelet you bought the other day. From now on you don't buy a hairpin without my approval."

She seemed to sink lower into the big leather armchair. Then she nodded her head slowly, like a repentant child. When I left the house a short time later she was already at the bar mixing herself a double martini.

Of course I attended Alex's funeral—with a sobbing Cora—and offered my condolences to Denise. The routine police investigation into Alex's death had turned up nothing but what they already suspected—that he'd been the victim of an unknown burglar. I was slowly feeding back into the casino some of the money I took from Alex's safe. By the end of the week there was over $500 extra—not too much to arouse anyone's suspicion.

I was whistling when I entered the club office but I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw Munro waiting for me.

"Something very interesting turned up in your weekly take, Frankie." He dropped an envelope onto my desk and out fell the shiny new $10 and $20 bills I'd lifted from Alex's safe. "I'm very curious as to how

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you got hold of these particular bills."

"Why, from one of the customers, I guess," I stammered.

"There's only one place these bills could come from. I don't know why you hit Alex, Frankie—but you made a big mistake." Munro's eyes became hard slits. "Your stepbrother headed up our European counterfeit operations and this is part of a batch of bills that were to hit the streets of Rome and Paris next month."

"I didn't know—I swear I had no idea—"

"You were never very bright, Frankie, that's why you've always been a second stringer. Now, Alex, there was a real sharpshooter. We're going to miss *him.*" He rose slowly from the chair. "The first question I asked myself when I spotted the queer money mixed in with the take was why, if you'd stolen it, would you want to *add* it in the weekly gross? There was only one answer."

Munro opened the door and two of his boys stepped inside. "Al and Joe will escort you back to your house so you can get the rest of the bills for us—we don't want any of it out of our hands at the moment. Like I said, Frankie, your hitting Alex was a big mistake."

My knees were buckling but I knew there was no use protesting as I was escorted out of the club and into the black sedan. It was like a nightmare—me outwitting the cops and still ending up a loser.

As we drove along I seemed to hear Alex laughing at me. It has always been that way—all our lives—Alex managing to outsmart me, always managing to have the last word.

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a NEW Chick Kelly story by

S. S. RAFFERTY

In which Chick Kelly, the night-club comic and show-biz sleuth, makes like an armchair detective—well, it wasn't really an armchair, it was more like a bed; and how Chick the Dick put two and two together—well, it wasn't two and two, it was more like ten thirty and five forty-five. . .Right on, Chick!

SHOW 'EM, CHICK!

by S. S. RAFFERTY

It started out with a sudden aversion to cigarettes, so I figured my lungs had finally gone on strike against nicotine. Then alcohol started to taste awful, and that depressed me. Chick Kelly without alcohol is like a one-armed Willy Mays. Since the last doctor to see me was the one who delivered me, I decided to ignore the symptoms. I even ignored the dull ache in my upper abdomen. Then one morning I had to stop ignoring. I was five shades yellower than Ling, the head-waiter at my night club.

"Hepatitis," says Dr. Muller, a no-nonsense Teutonic type who must have served in the Panzer Medical Corps.

"Serum hepatitis," he says after he takes a bunch of tests. "Do you use drugs, Mr. Kelly?"

"Pot, but no popping."

"Well, somehow you have come in contact with an unsterile hypodermic needle."

I do a mental re-run and come up hornet-angry. My own good deed has laid me low. My bread on the waters has come back soggy.

"The only thing that's been stuck into me, Doc, is when I gave blood to a sick actor over three months ago."

"That's it, then. Hepatitis has a hundred-day incubation period."

Then he tells me that the thing I've got can take another hundred days of recuperation, and I can see my club, my

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career, and my sanity going up the flue.

First, Doc Muller tosses me into the hospital, which is really a slammer with pills and guards in crispy white uniforms. I say guards because Miss Pringle, my day nurse, always has hers up. My liver may be in trouble, but my libido is in one hundred percent working order.

After a couple of weeks in antisepticland the Doc lets me go home. It's boredom time in my life. In the hospital I at least had Pringle to make passes at; now all I had was a ceiling to stare at.

The only visitors Muller would allow were Barry and Sylvia Kantrowitz. Barry was my agent when I was doing stand-up comedy on the road. He is now my partner in the joint on Third Avenue. Sylvia is my surrogate mother and surrogate judge. She doesn't believe in *sui juris* until a boy is over 45. Between Sylvia and Muller I am making the Prisoner of Zenda look like a free spirit.

To keep myself from going bananas I start reading books. I'm not much of a reader—Barry once said I had more TV sets than books. He's right. And TV is no help because it goes off around 5:30 A.M. and you have to sit there looking at a blank tube until after six o'clock, when you get to take a course in Islamic History or some other chunk of heavy scintillation.

It was during my second week at home that I started to play with my ear. Man, do I have an ear! You have to have one to be able to do all the impersonations I do in my act.

I start listening to the sounds of my apartment house. Alarm clocks going off. Johns and showers being used, a few arguments about sex, and a lot of arguments about money. This is not difficult to do, because modern technology has finally produced a wall that is onion-skin thick and New York builders have embraced the new find with passion. The F.B.I. and the C.I.A. can junk their listening devices as far as the Big Apple is concerned.

I was getting bored with the eavesdropping when *she* moved into the apartment upstairs. The previous couple—man, could they fight!—had moved out on a Monday. I could hear the moving guys banging the furniture around, and then silence. Just for the hell of it I checked the "Apartments for Rent" columns of yesterday's Sunday *Times*, and sure enough, there was a one-bedroom apartment for rent in my building. The rest of the ad must have been written by a poet who had never seen the

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place. You'd swear it was the Taj Mahal. The "splendid view of Central Park" was pure fantasy. Well, maybe not fantasy, if you could stick your head out the bathroom window and crane your neck to the left without falling a dozen stories.

She first looked at the pad on Monday afternoon. I could hear the super's shuffle and the distinctive click of a woman's heels. From the way she strode through the foyer and into the bedroom I could tell she was tall, yet the impact of her feet told me she was lanky. Because my apartment is a duplicate of hers, I knew exactly where she was as she made her tour.

She moved in on Wednesday and had very little furniture. I heard only two pieces put down in the bedroom and four in the living room. I let my imagination idle and figured her bed was against the front wall, the same as mine. I'm falling in love, long distance.

She fooled around in the kitchen till six o'clock, which bothered me. I don't like girls who eat dinner early. I also feel sorry for girls who eat alone. Maybe she's ugly. Well, even ugly girls shouldn't eat alone. I was a little miffed when she left the apartment at 10:30 P.M. Where was she going at this hour? What kind of girl would be out on the streets at 10:30?

I tossed and turned all night. Do you know when she waltzed in? At 5:45 in the morning! What is she, a hooker or something? And she didn't even go to the bathroom to take off her makeup or to Lux her things. Some broad I picked.

By the time her clock-radio went off at noon I had forgiven her. Probably up the whole night with a sick friend. Better yet, maybe she's a night nurse. Maybe it's Pringle? She had tracked me down. Couldn't live without me. I asked Sylvia Kantrowitz to check the name on the mailbox of Apartment 12J. It turned out to be B. Filmore. B for what? Beth, Bettina? I settled on Baby.

After her first week I had her down pat. She went to her nursing job (I believe, I believe) every night at 10:30. Returned at 5:45. Slept till noon. Had breakfast at 1:00 and dinner at 6:00. She had to be over 25 because she had a lot of Bobby Darrin records.

I now assumed she did take her makeup off when she got home, but not in the bathroom. She did it at a vanity table in a negligee—you know, like Cyd Charisse. How do I know that? Simple, she wears mules after she comes home. Mules and negligees go together.

It was on a Wednesday that she wounded me. I heard her

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doorbell ring in the afternoon and heard her walk to the foyer. In seconds there is another set of shoes pounding over my head. It's a man. And she's still in her mules! My baby is two-timing me. I figured she was making a drink for the gink in the kitchen and then everything went quiet for half an hour except for Bobby Darrin singing "Beyond the Sea"—formerly one of my favorites.

The cheapskate left at 5:30 without taking her out to dinner. I would have. I'm so disgusted with her that I turned up my TV full blast. The wounded lover watching Bugs Bunny cartoons. I had a good mind to get up, wrap a sheet around me, ring her doorbell, and make a goo-goo face at her when she answered. Kelly the Yellow Peril Strikes Back!

Nuts! I ignored her for two days, but on Saturday and Sunday it was difficult. She obviously didn't work on weekends. She just sat around listening to records. Monday night she was right back on schedule with the 10:30 to 5:45 schtick.

Wednesday of the third week I must have had a relapse, because I was very tired. Sylvia came in as usual, cleaned up, made lunch, and put a dinner casserole in a slow oven. It was around two o'clock when the doorbell upstairs rang. I was nodding off when I heard his crepe-soled shoes squish into his crummy love nest. My eyes must have been protecting me, because the lids lowered and I was copping zzzzs. I dreamed I was the Yellow Peril again and had been shot in the liver by an evildoer.

When I woke up it was 6:30. I guess the great lover up there had finally taken Baby to dinner, because the place was silent all night. She didn't show up at 5:45 and she was out all the next day. Me worry? Why? We were through. Kaput!

By Friday I was going crackers. Not a sound has come out of her place for the last two days. Maybe she's sick. Maybe she's in Puerto Rico with Hot Lips Harry having a gay old time for herself.

I call the super who, for a change, is sober and ask him if Miss Filmore in 12J is away on a trip.

Ever alert to the shifting moods of his domain, Cholly the sober super sucks air through his teeth and says, "I dunno."

"Well, Cholly, there's been a radio playing up there for three whole days and nights, and you should go in and turn it off. It's driving me nuts."

"I dunno, Mr. Kelly. I can't

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go into someone's apartment like that."

"The hell you can't. Read your own lease. If you don't do it, I'll call the cops and they'll do it." I slammed the phone down and waited. I was hoping Cholly wouldn't balk when he didn't hear a radio through the door, and he didn't. Five minutes later I heard the front door of her apartment open and heard Cholly shuffling across the bare floor. He stopped for a moment and then he was running out of the apartment. My heart felt worse than my liver.

In a fast five minutes I hear a siren on the street and later an army of footsteps overhead. About a half hour drags by and then my doorbell rings. I tried to get up but I couldn't make it. Finally I heard the door click and who is standing in my doorway but Lieutenant Bullethead Jaffee, a homicide cop who, to put it mildly, detests me.

"What the hell are you made up for," he scowls as he comes over to the bed.

"I'm practising the death scene from Son of Yellow Peril."

"Always the smart mouth. Are you really sick? Is it catching?"

"Lieutenant, you are immune to the Black Plague, among other things. I have hepatitis and a large pain in the neck."

Jaffee turns to a uniformed dick and tells him to "Get the Doc down here."

"What's happening, Lieutenant? What's all the commotion upstairs?"

"Someone strangled your girl friend. Just like the other one, huh, Kelly?"

This guy is referring to a case a couple of years ago where a girl was found dead in my apartment. They caught the guy who did it, but Jaffee never forgave himself for not pinning it on me. I just ignored him, then a guy with a black bag arrived and examined me.

"Hepatitis all right. You under a doctor's care, son?"

"At the moment I seem to be under the medical examiner's care, which is a little chilling."

He smiled at me. "How long, three, four weeks?"

"Hey, Doc, you do all right with live bodies, too. What happened up there?"

"Young girl, about twenty-six, twenty-seven, strangled. Dead about two days, give or take a few hours."

"Would he have had the strength to do it, Doc?" Jaffee asks, nodding at me. "Could he have gone up the stairwell and strangled her?"

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"I doubt it, Lieutenant."

"Wait a minute, Jaffee, what is this? Are you back in the label-pasting business?"

"Why not, funnyman? You live directly under her. She's your type—glossy. And your record with women—"

"You know, Lieutenant," I leaned on one elbow, "you're one of the biggest windsuckers I know. If you're going to play Murder One with me, I've already won the case. You're in here without a warrant, you've had me examined against my will by a police doctor, and you have slandered my good name with the women of this fair city. Now why don't you get the hell out of here before I have a relapse or maybe even die and sue the city for negligent homicide."

"Why did you tell the super that a radio was playing up there? There wasn't."

"I heard a radio playing somewhere. I thought it was in 12J. Doc, I don't feel so good."

"I can see you don't. I think we should leave him alone right now, Lieutenant. He's a sick man."

And man, was I sick. I had the doctor call Barry at the club before they left. I must have slept for six hours or so, and when I came to, Sylvia was sitting by my bed playing the Worried Bubulla.

When she was out in the kitchen heating the ever-present chicken soup, I saw the *Post* she had brought. The story made a Page Three spot, and they were referring to Miss Barbara Fil-more as "The Mystery Woman."

She had no visible means of support. She had a checking account at Chase, and all the deposits had been made in cash. She had no previous address and nothing had been found in her apartment to identify her. The F.B.I. could not get a make on her fingerprints. The story quoted Jaffee as saying the expected—more developments tomorrow.

Baloney. Jaffee was holding an empty bag. If you're wondering why I didn't tell him about Mr. Crepe Shoes and Baby's nocturnal schedule, you don't know me very well. I wouldn't tell Jaffee his hat was on fire, and besides, I had a noodle I could solve the case myself, no hands and flat on my back.

First, I have to get some more dope, so I call Steve Kozak, a Sergeant who deserves better than the Vice Squad.

"Hey, Chick, how are you feelin'?" he says. "I hear you and Jaffee have been to the mat again."

"Two nouns that I dislike are 'Jaffee' and 'bankruptcy.'

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I'm on the mend, Steve. Tell me, bubbie, was that broad that got knocked off in my building a hooker?"

"Looks it on the surface, Chick, but we have no pros rap on her and the M.E. says he doubts it. Maybe someone's doxy, but I'd say not a professional."

"They say she was a looker. Maybe a showgirl?"

"She'd have to be registered with us to work. Besides, is there a showgirl in this town you don't know?"

"Thanks, fan. Haven't your guys pinned down anyone who might have seen her with someone? Like in the apartment house or a taxicab driver maybe?"

"Nada. Why all the interest?"

"Well, Jaffee was making a lot of noise around here this afternoon."

"Don't worry about that. The M.E. says you couldn't stroke a cat, never mind strangle a broad. Are you through pumping me, buddy?"

"All full. So long, Steve."

Sylvia comes back with the soup and four barrels of advice about conserving my strength. If she were twenty years younger, I'd have an affair with her, but first I would be sure to tape her mouth.

Barry dropped in around eleven o'clock with a report from the club. It's depressing when your business runs smoothly without you. Finally Barry and Sylvia left around 1:30 and the building settled down to night sounds.

It might sound psychotic, but I dreaded 5:45 coming. The last movie would be over on TV and she wouldn't be coming home to break the silence. Damn it, I'm hung up on the sounds of a woman I never saw and now she's dead. I've spent a pile knocking around clubs and gin mills till the dawn comes up. I'm one of the night people, but now I hate it.

I watched John Wayne kill 5,000 Indians on TV and then saw Randolph Scott kill 5,001 Indians. Then I watched the Marine Corps Band do the anthem. Blank tube.

I get on the think. Barbara Filmore is a kept woman. Okay. But for a kept woman, her lover only called twice in three weeks. That's light duty.

The thing that really gets to me is her consistent pattern. Out at 10:30, in at 5:45, lunch at 1:00, dinner at 6:00. Day in and day out. Where was she between 10:30 and 5:45 every night? That's really the nub of the bit. Was she at her boy friend's place? But why set her up in a separate pad when his own was free? Okay, if she was

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someone's mistress, then the guy had to be married, so his place was out. But obviously her digs were out, too!

So the 10:30 to 5:45 routine was liaison time for them. Maybe his wife worked nights? Maybe Baby met him at work? But who works from 10:30 to 5:45 in the morning? Outside of show business, everyone in this world works an eight-hour shift, or at least pretends to.

For three days it bugs me. Then at 5:45 on a Tuesday morning my mental sun rises. Wow! When Sylvia shows up, I send her down to the basement to get Cholly to give her a stack of back issues of the Sunday *Times* from the room where they save them for salvage. I do some fast calculations in Section Two and then I call a guy I know at the United Communications Workers Union and get an address. My next call is to Mario Puccini, who runs a couple of limos for hire.

As soon as I get Sylvia out of my apartment, I struggle into my clothes and damn near faint making it to the elevator and down to the street. Mario thinks I'm crazy wanting to go to Jackson Heights, but he takes me anyway. It was one of those long rows of duplexes that defy accurate description. The porch was glass louvered on three sides and the slats were foggy from the heat within.

The lady answering the door was about 50 or 100, take your pick. Her hair was dirty gray, maybe yellow gray. She might have been pretty once, but weight and age and maybe worry had sagged her. She told me Cal Phillips was asleep.

"Maybe we could have a talk, Mrs. Phillips. It's as important to me as it is to you."

"You from the station? Cal's still sick. You look familiar to me."

"No, I'm from the Union, Mrs. Phillips. Health Plan."

She showed me into a tiny living room that smelled of mothballs. There were several pictures on the fake fireplace mantle. A drab girl in a graduation gown, another of her in a communion dress, and a retouched picture of a young guy in an Air Force cap.

"Can't see why the Union Health Plan is getting excited because Cal's been sick a few days. Does he get benefits?"

"Is Cal really asleep, Mrs. Phillips? Really?"

"You ain't from no union. You're a policeman."

"No cop, lady. Just a friend of Barbara Filmore."

I could have slugged her with a sashweight. It stunned her.

"Who the devil's Barbara Filmore?"

"A lady I never saw. But

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she's dead and I owe her something. Did you owe her something too, Mrs. Phillips?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Suppose I tell you that I live in a building that has a super with an indelible memory. Suppose I tell you that your husband paid a call there last Wednesday and when he left, Barbara was dead? Suppose—"

"That's all you're doing—supposing. Cal was bowling Wednesday afternoon and he can prove it. Now get out of here. You look like you got something contagious."

"Yeah. Justice is catching, Mrs. Phillips. If your feet hurt, why don't you sit down? Those space shoes you're wearing—do they help?"

"What the hell is going on here?" a shortish white-haired guy with a two-day beard said from the staircase just outside the living-room arch.

"Come on in, Cal, we were just talking about a mutual friend. Barbara Filmore."

Up to now it was bluff and conjecture, but the look on Cal Phillips' face totaled it all up true blue.

"Debbie," Phillips said to his wife, "you told me that—"

"Shut up, Cal, he can't prove a thing."

"Hell I can't. Your husband visited two weeks ago at the apartment and she visited him every night at the television station. That's a great way to spend an evening, Cal. You're the only one who works there after eleven o'clock when prime time ends. It must have been boring just pushing those computer buttons to feed in movies and commercials. I don't blame you for keeping a girl around to break the monotony. Big Mama here must have caught on and dropped in on Barbara to end it all."

She went for me and would have wrung my neck if it weren't for Mario busting in and flattening her. I felt like I was run over by a truck. Of course, it was back to the hospital for me. Doc Muller chewed me out. Jaffee chewed me out. Sylvia Kantrowitz is still chewing me out. What do I care? I have Pringle again and she is definitely in love with me because my name is in the headlines.

"It was very simple," I explained to her as she gave me a backrub. "I realized the girl was out of her apartment at the same hours I was watching late-late TV movies. When I checked the station listings in the paper, I found that WZY-TV was on the latest. Most stations have only one engineer on duty while the computer runs the

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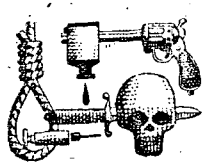
tapes and the union gave me Cal Phillips' name."

"But how did you know it was his wife, Mr. Kelly?"

"Call me Chick, Pringle, and up a little higher, please. I didn't know it was the wife until she opened the door and I saw the space shoes and made the connection between the space shoes and the squish of crepe soles that I had heard the day the girl was killed."

I'm debating whether to move Pringle into 12J. You see, I have a couple of ex-wives who might knock off Nursie in a rage, and we all know you can't collect alimony if you're serving a life sentence. Get it, folks?



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a *NEW* short story by

PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Do you like horror stories? If you don't we suggest that you skip this one. If you do like an occasional tale of horror, Patricia Highsmith's newest story will be your saucer of crime. And if you do read "Day of Reckoning," we doubt if you will ever lose the image in your mind's eye of that predawn scene in front of the long gray barn when "it looked as if snow had fallen on the land." Except that it wasn't snow. . .

DAY OF RECKONING

by PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

John took a taxi from the station, as his uncle had told him to do in case they weren't there to meet him. It was less than two miles to Hanshaw Chickens, Inc., as his Uncle Ernie Hanshaw now called his farm. John knew the white two-story house well, but the long gray barn was new to him. It was huge, covering the whole area where the cow barn and the pigpens had been.

"Plenty of wishbones in that place!" the taxi driver said cheerfully as John paid him.

John smiled. "Yes, and I was just thinking—not a chicken in sight!"

John carried his suitcase toward the house. "Anybody home?" he called, thinking his Aunt Helen would probably be in the kitchen now, getting lunch.

Then he saw the flattened cat. No, it was a kitten. Was it real or made of paper? John set his suitcase down and bent closer. It was real. It lay on its side, almost level with the damp reddish earth, in the wide track of a tire. Its skull had been crushed and there was blood. The kitten was white with patches of orange and black.

John heard a hum of machinery from the barn. He put his suitcase on the front porch, and hearing nothing from the

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house, set off at a trot for the new barn. He found the big front doors locked and went round to the back, again at a trot, because the barn seemed to be a quarter of a mile long. Besides the machine hum, John heard a high-pitched sound, a din of cries and peeps from inside.

"Ernie?" John yelled. Then he saw Helen. "Hello, Helen!"

"John! Welcome! You took a taxi! We didn't hear any car." She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Why, you've grown another three inches."

His uncle climbed down from a ladder and shook John's hand. "How're you, boy?"

"Okay, Ernie. What's going on here?" John looked up at moving belts which disappeared somewhere inside the barn. A rectangular metal container, nearly as big as a boxcar, rested on the ground.

Ernie pulled John closer and shouted that the grain, a special mixture, had just been delivered and was being stored in the factory, as he called the barn. This afternoon a man would take back the container.

"Lights shouldn't go on now, according to schedule, but we'll make an exception so you can see. Look!" Ernie pulled a switch inside the barn door and the semidarkness changed to glaring light, bright as full sun.

The cackles and screams of the chickens augmented like a siren, like a thousand sirens, and John instinctively covered his ears. Ernie's lips moved, but John could not hear him. John swung around to see Helen. She was standing farther back, and waved a hand, shook her head and smiled, as if to say she couldn't bear the racket. Ernie drew John farther into the barn, but he had given up talking and merely pointed.

The chickens were smallish and mostly white, and they all shuffled constantly. John saw that this was because the platforms on which they stood slanted forward, inclining them toward the slowly moving feed troughs. But not all of them were eating. Some were trying to peck the chickens next to them.

Each chicken had its own little wire coop. There must have been forty rows of chickens on the ground floor, and eight or ten tiers of chickens went up to the ceiling. Between the double rows of back-to-back chickens were aisles wide enough for a man to pass and sweep the floor, John supposed, and just as he thought this, Ernie turned a wheel, and water began to shoot over the floor. The floor slanted toward various drain holes.

"All automatic! Somethin', eh?"

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John recognized the words from Ernie's lips and nodded appreciatively. "Terrific!" But he was ready to get away from the noise.

Ernie shut off the water.

John noticed that the chickens had worn their beaks down to blunt nubs. What else could they do but eat? John had read a little about battery chicken farming. These hens of Ernie's, like the hens he had read about, couldn't turn around in their coops. Much of the general flurry in the barn was caused by chickens trying to fly upward.

Ernie cut the lights. The doors closed after them, also automatically.

"Machine farming has really got me over the hump," Ernie said, still talking loudly. "I'm making good money now. And just imagine, one man—me—can run the whole show!"

John grinned. "You mean you won't have anything for me to do?"

"Oh, there's plenty to do. You'll see. How about some lunch first? Tell Helen I'll be in in about fifteen minutes."

John walked toward Helen. "Fabulous."

"Yes. Ernie's in love with it."

They went on toward the house, Helen looking down at her feet because the ground was muddy in spots. She wore old tennis shoes, black corduroy pants, and a rust-colored sweater. John purposely walked between her and where the dead kitten lay, not wanting to mention it now.

He carried his suitcase up to the sunny corner room in which he had slept since he was a boy of ten, when Helen and Ernie had bought the farm. He changed into blue jeans and went down to join Helen in the kitchen.

"Would you like an old-fashioned? We've got to celebrate your arrival," Helen said. She was making two drinks at the wooden table.

"Fine. Where's Susan?" Susan was their eight-year-old daughter.

"She's at a—well, sort of summer school. They'll bring her back around four-thirty. Helps fill in the summer holidays. They make awful clay ashtrays and fringed money purses—you know. Then you've got to praise them."

John laughed. He gazed at his aunt-by-marriage, thinking she was still very attractive at—what was it? Thirty-one, he thought. She was about five feet four, slender, with reddish blonde curly hair, and eyes that sometimes looked green, sometimes blue. And she had a very pleasant voice. "Oh, thank you." John accepted his drink.

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There were slices of fruit in it, topped with a cherry.

"Awfully good to see you, John. How's college? And how're your folks?"

Both those items were all right. John would graduate from Ohio State next year when he would be 20, then he was going to take a postgraduate course in government. He was an only child, and his parents lived in Dayton, 120 miles away.

Then John mentioned the kitten. "I hope it's not yours," he said, and realized at once that it must have been, because Helen put her glass down and stood up. Who else could the kitten have belonged to, John thought, since there was no other house around?

"Oh, Lord! Susan's going to be—" Helen rushed out the back door.

John ran after her, straight for the kitten which Helen now saw from a distance.

"It was that big truck this morning," Helen said. "The driver sits so high up he can't see what's—"

"I'll help you," John said, looking around for a spade or a trowel. He found a shovel and returned, and pried the body up gently, as if it were still alive. He held it in both his hands. "We ought to bury it."

"Of course. Susan mustn't see it, but I've got to tell her."

John dug where Helen suggested, a spot near an apple tree behind the house. He covered the grave over and put some tufts of grass back so it would not catch the eye.

"The times I've brought that kitten in the house when the damned truck came!" Helen said. "She was barely four months, wasn't afraid of anything, just went trotting up to cars as if they were something to play with, you know?" She gave a nervous laugh. "And this morning the truck came at eleven, and I was about to take a pie out of the oven."

John didn't know what to say. "Maybe you should get another kitten for Susan as soon as you can."

"What're you two doing?" Ernie walked toward them from the back door of the house.

"We just buried Beansy," Helen said. "The truck got her this morning."

"Oh." Ernie's smile disappeared. "That's too bad. That's really too bad, Helen."

But at lunch Ernie was cheerful enough, talking of vitamins and antibiotics in his chicken feed and the production of one and one-quarter eggs per day per hen. Though it was July, Ernie was lengthening the chickens' "day" by artificial light.

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"All birds are geared to spring," Ernie said. "They lay more when they think spring is coming. The ones I've got are at peak. In October they'll be under a year old, and I'll sell them and take on a new batch."

John listened attentively. He was to be here a month and wanted to be helpful. "They really do eat, don't they? A lot of them have worn off their beaks, I noticed."

Ernie laughed. "They're de-beaked. They'd peck each other through the wire if they weren't. Two of 'em got loose in my first batch and nearly killed each other. Well, one did kill the other. Believe me, I de-beak 'em now, according to instructions."

"And one chicken went on eating the other," Helen said. "Cannibalism." She laughed uneasily. "Ever hear of cannibalism among chickens, John?"

"No."

"Our chickens are insane," Helen said.

Insane. John smiled a little. Maybe Helen was right. Their noises had sounded pretty crazy.

"Helen doesn't much like battery farming," Ernie said apologetically to John. "She's always thinking about the old days. But we weren't doing so well then."

That afternoon John helped his uncle draw the conveyor belts back into the barn. He began learning the levers and switches that worked things. Belts removed eggs and deposited them gently into plastic containers. It was nearly 5:00 P.M. before John could get away. He wanted to say hello to his cousin Susan, a lively little girl with hair like her mother's.

As John crossed the front porch he heard a child's weeping, and he remembered the kitten. He decided to go ahead anyway and speak to Susan.

Susan and her mother were in the living room—a front room with flowered print curtains and cherrywood furniture. Some additions, such as a bigger television set, had been made since John had seen the room last. Helen was on her knees beside the sofa on which Susan lay, her face buried in one arm.

"Hello, Susan," John said. "I'm sorry about your kitten."

Susan lifted a round wet face. A bubble started at her lips and broke. "Beansy—"

John embraced her impulsively. "We'll find another kitten. I promise. Maybe tomorrow. Yes?" He looked at Helen.

Helen nodded and smiled a little. "Yes, we will."

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The next afternoon, as soon as the lunch dishes had been washed, John and Helen set out in the station wagon for a farm eight miles away that belonged to some people named Ferguson. The Fergusons had two female cats that frequently had kittens, Helen said. And they were in luck this time. One of the cats had a litter of five—one black, one white, three mixed—and the other cat was pregnant.

"White?" John suggested. The Fergusons had given them a choice.

"Mixed," Helen said. "White is all good and black is—maybe unlucky."

They chose a black and white female with white feet.

"I can see this one being called Bootsy," Helen laughed.

The Fergusons were simple people, getting on in years, and very hospitable. Mrs. Ferguson insisted they partake of a freshly baked coconut cake along with some rather powerful homemade wine. The kitten romped around the kitchen, playing with gray rolls of dust that she dragged out from under a big cupboard.

"That ain't no battery kitten!" Frank Ferguson remarked, and drank deep.

"Can we see your chickens, Frank?" Helen asked. She slapped John's knee suddenly. "Frank has the most *wonderful* chickens, almost a hundred!"

"What's wonderful about 'em?" Frank said, getting up on a stiff leg. He opened the back screen door. "You know where they are, Helen."

John's head was buzzing pleasantly from the wine as he walked with Helen out to the chicken yard. Here were Rhode Island Reds, big white Leghorns, roosters strutting and tossing their combs, half-grown speckled chickens, and lots of little chicks about six inches high. The ground was covered with claw-scored watermelon rinds, tin bowls of grain and mush, and there was much chicken dung. A wheelless wreck of a car seemed to be a favorite laying spot: three hens sat on the back of the front seat with their eyes half closed, ready to drop eggs which would surely break on the floor behind them.

"It's such a wonderful *mess!*" John shouted, laughing.

Helen hung by her fingers in the wire fence, rapt. "Like the chickens I knew when I was a kid. Well, Ernie and I had them too, till about—" She smiled at John. "You know—a year ago. Let's go in!"

John found the gate, a limp thing made of wire that fastened with a wooden bar. They went in and closed it behind them.

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Several hens drew back and regarded them with curiosity, making throaty, skeptical noises.

"They're such stupid darlings!" Helen watched a hen fly up and perch herself in a peach tree. "They can see the sun! They can fly!"

"And scratch for worms—and eat watermelon!" John said.

"When I was little, I used to dig worms for them at my grandmother's farm. With a hoe. And sometimes I'd step on their droppings and Grandma always made me wash my feet under the garden hose before I came in the house." She laughed. A chicken evaded her outstretched hand with an *Urrr-rrk!* "Grandma's chickens were so tame, I could touch them. All bony and warm with the sun, their feathers. Sometimes I want to open all the coops in our barn and open the doors and let all our chickens loose, just to see them walking on the grass for a few minutes."

"Say, Helen, want to buy one of these to take home? Just for fun? Maybe a couple of 'em?"

"No."

"How much did the kitten cost? Anything?"

"No, nothing."

Susan took the kitten into her arms, and John could see that the tragedy of Beansy would soon be forgotten. To John's disappointment, Helen lost her gaiety during dinner. Maybe it was because Ernie was droning on about his profit and loss—not loss really, but outlay. Ernie was obsessed, John realized. That was why Helen was bored.

Ernie worked hard now, regardless of what he said about machinery doing everything. There were creases on both sides of his mouth, and they were not from laughing. He was starting to get a paunch. Helen had told John that last year Ernie had dismissed their handyman Sam, who'd been with them seven years.

"Say," Ernie said, demanding John's attention. "What d'you think of the idea? Start a battery chicken farm when you finish school, and hire *one man* to run it. You could take another job in Chicago or Washington or wherever, and you'd have a steady *separate* income for life."

John was silent. He couldn't imagine having a battery chicken farm.

"Any bank would finance you—with a word from Clive, of course."

Clive was John's father.

Helen was looking down at her plate.

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"Not really my lifestyle, I think," John answered finally. "I know it's profitable."

After dinner Ernie went into the living room to do his reckoning, as he called it. He did some reckoning almost every night. John helped Helen with the dishes. She put a Mozart symphony on the record player. The music was nice, but John would have liked to talk with Helen.

On the other hand, what would he have said, exactly? *I understand why you're bored. I think you'd prefer pouring slop for pigs and tossing grain to real chickens, the way you used to.* John had a desire to put his arms around Helen as she bent over the sink, to turn her face to his and kiss her. What would Helen think if he did? That night, lying in bed, John dutifully read the brochures on battery chicken farming that Ernie had given him.

". . .The chickens are bred small so that they do not eat so much, and they rarely reach more than 3½ pounds. . .Young chickens are subjected to a light routine which tricks them into thinking that a day is 6 hours long. The objective of the factory farmer is to increase the original 6-hour day by leaving the lights on for a longer period each week. Artificial Spring Period is maintained for the hen's whole lifetime of 10 months. . .There is no real falling off of egg-laying in the natural sense, though the hen won't lay quite so many eggs toward the end. . ." (Why? John wondered. And wasn't "not quite so many" the same as "falling off"?) "At 10 months the hen is sold for about 30¢ a pound, depending on the market. . ."

And below:

"Richard K. Schultz of Poon's Cross, Pa., writes: 'I am more than pleased and so is my wife with the modernization of my farm into a battery chicken farm operated with Muskeego-Ryan electric equipment. Profits have quadrupled in a year and a half and we have even bigger hopes for the future. . .'

"Writes Henry Vliess of Farnham, Kentucky: 'My old farm was barely breaking even. I had chickens, pigs, cows, the usual. My friends used to laugh at my hard work combined with all my tough luck. Then I. . .'"

John had a dream. He was flying like Superman in Ernie's chicken barn, and the lights were all blazing brightly. Many of the imprisoned chickens looked up at him, their eyes flashed silver, and they were struck blind. The noise they made was fantastic. They

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wanted to escape, but could no longer see, and the whole barn heaved with their efforts to fly upward. John flew about frantically, trying to find the lever to open the coops, the doors, anything, but he couldn't.

Then he woke up suddenly, startled to find himself in bed, propped on one elbow. His forehead and chest were damp with sweat. Moonlight came strong through the window. In the night's silence he could hear the steady high-pitched din of the hundreds of chickens in the barn, though Ernie had said the barn was absolutely sound-proofed. Maybe it was "day-time" for the chickens now. Ernie said they had three more months to live.

In a short time John became more adept with the barn's machinery and the fast artificial clocks, but since the dream he no longer looked at the chickens as he had the first day. He did not look at them at all if he could help it. Once Ernie pointed out a dead one, and John removed it. Its breast, creased from the coop's barrier, was so distended it might have eaten itself to death.

Susan had named her kitten Bibsy, because it had a white oval on its chest like a bib.

"Beansy and now Bibsy," Helen said to John. "You'd think all Susan thinks about is food!"

Helen and John drove to town one Saturday morning. It was alternately sunny and showery, and they walked close together under an umbrella when the showers came. They bought meat, potatoes, washing powder, white paint for a kitchen shelf, and Helen bought a pink-and-white-striped blouse for herself. At a pet shop John acquired a basket with a pillow to give Susan for Bibsy.

When they got home there was a long dark gray car in front of the house.

"Why, that's the doctor's car!" Helen said.

"Does he come by just to visit?" John asked, and at once felt stupid, because something might have happend to Ernie. A grain delivery had been due that morning, and Ernie was always climbing about to see that everything was going right.

There was another car, dark green, which Helen didn't recognize. Helen and John went into the house.

It was Susan. She lay on the living-room floor beneath a plaid blanket, only one sandaled foot and yellow sock visible under the fringed edge. Dr. Geller was there, and a man Helen didn't know. Ernie stood rigid and panicked beside his daughter.

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Dr. Geller came toward Helen and said, "I'm sorry, Helen. Susan was dead by the time the ambulance got here. I sent for the coroner."

"What *happened*?" Helen started to touch Susan, and instinctively John caught her.

"Honey, I didn't see her in time," Ernie said. "She was chasing under that damned container after the kitten just as it was lowering."

"Yeah, it bumped her on the head," said a husky man in tan workclothes, one of the delivery men. "She was running out from under it, like Ernie said. My *gosh*, I'm sorry, Mrs. Hanshaw!"

Helen gasped, then she covered her face.

"You'll need a sedative, Helen," Dr. Geller said.

The doctor gave Helen a needle in her arm. Helen said nothing. Her mouth was slightly open, and her eyes stared straight ahead. Another car came and took the body away on a stretcher.

With a shaky hand Ernie poured whiskies.

Bibsy leaped about the room and sniffed at the red splotch on the carpet. John went to the kitchen to get a sponge. It was best to try to clean it up, John thought, while the others were in the kitchen. He went back to the kitchen for a saucepan of water, then scrubbed at the abundant red.

His head was ringing, and he had difficulty keeping his balance. Back in the kitchen, he drank off another whiskey at a gulp and at once it burned his ears.

"Ernie, I think I'd better take off," the delivery man said solemnly. "You know where to find me."

Helen went up to the bedroom she shared with Ernie and did not come down when it was time for dinner. From his room John heard floorboards creaking faintly and knew that Helen was walking about in the room. He wanted to go in and speak to her, but he was afraid he would not be capable of saying the right thing. Ernie should be with her, John thought.

John and Ernie gloomily scrambled some eggs, and John went to ask Helen if she would come down or would she prefer to have him bring her something. He knocked on the door.

"Come in," Helen said.

He loved her voice, and was somehow surprised to find that it wasn't any different since her child had died. She was lying on the double bed, still in the same clothes, smoking a cigarette.

"I don't care to eat, thanks, but I'd like a whiskey."

John rushed down, eager to

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get something she wanted. He brought ice, a glass, and the bottle on a tray. "Do you just want to go to sleep?" John asked.

"Yes."

She had not turned on a light. John kissed her cheek, and for an instant she slipped her arm around his neck and kissed his cheek also. Then he left the room.

Downstairs the eggs tasted dry and John could hardly swallow even with sips of milk.

"My God," Ernie said. "My God." He was evidently trying to say more as he looked at John with an effort at politeness, or closeness.

And John, like Ernie, found himself looking down at his plate, wordless. Finally, miserable in the silence, John got up with his plate and patted Ernie awkwardly on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Ernie."

They opened another bottle of whiskey, one of the two bottles left in the living-room cabinet.

"If I'd known this would happen I'd never have started this damned chicken farm. You know that. I meant to earn something for my family—not go limping along year after year."

John saw that the kitten had found the new basket and gone to sleep in it on the living-room floor. "Ernie, you probably want to talk to Helen. I'll be up at the usual time tomorrow to give you a hand." That meant 7:00 A.M.

"Okay. I'm in a daze tonight. Forgive me, John."

John lay for nearly an hour in his bed without sleeping. He heard Ernie go quietly into the bedroom across the hall, but he heard no voices or even a murmur after that. Ernie was not much like Clive, John thought. John's father might have given way to tears for a minute, might have cursed. Then with his father it would have been all over, except for comforting his wife.

A raucous noise, rising and falling, woke John up. The chickens, of course. What the hell was it now? They were louder than he'd ever heard them. He looked out the front window. In the predawn light he could see that the barn's front doors were open. Then the lights in the barn came on, blazing out onto the grass. John pulled on his shoes without tying them and rushed into the hall.

"Ernie! Helen!" he yelled at their closed door.

John ran out of the house. A white tide of chickens was now oozing throught the wide front doors of the barn. What on earth had happened? "Get

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back!" he yelled at the chickens, flailing his arms.

The little hens might have been blind or might not have heard him at all through their own squawks. They kept on flowing from the barn, some fluttering over the others, and sinking again in the white sea.

John cupped his hands to his mouth. "Ernie! The *doors!*" He was shouting into the barn, because Ernie must be there.

John plunged into the hens and made another effort to shoo them back. It was hopeless. Unused to walking, the chickens teetered like drunks, lurched against each other, stumbled forward, fell back on their tails, but they kept pouring out, many borne on the backs of those that walked. They were pecking at John's ankles.

John kicked some aside and moved toward the barn doors again, but the pain of the blunt beaks on his ankles and lower legs made him stop. Some chickens tried to fly up to attack him, but had no strength in their wings. *They are insane,* John remembered. Suddenly frightened, John ran toward the clearer area at the side of the barn, then on toward the back door. He knew how to open the back door. It had a combination lock.

Helen was standing at the corner of the barn in her bathrobe, where John had first seen her when he arrived. The back door was closed.

"What's *happening?*" John shouted.

"I opened the coops," Helen said.

"Opened them? Why? Where's Ernie?"

"He's in there." Helen was oddly calm, as if she were standing and talking in her sleep.

"Well, what's he *doing?* Why doesn't he close the place?" John was shaking Helen by the shoulders, trying to wake her up. He released her and ran to the back door.

"I've locked it again," Helen said.

John worked the combination as fast as he could, but he could hardly see it.

"Don't open it! Do you want them coming *this* way?" Helen was suddenly alert, dragging John's hands from the lock.

Then John understood. Ernie was in there. Even if Ernie were screaming, they couldn't have heard him.

A smile came over Helen's face. "Yes, he's in there. I think they'll finish him."

John, not quite hearing over the noise of chickens, had read her lips. His heart was beating fast.

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Then Helen slumped and John caught her. John knew it was too late to save Ernie. He also thought that Ernie was no longer screaming.

Helen straightened up. "Come with me. Let's watch them," she said, and drew John feebly, yet with determination, along the side of the barn toward the front doors.

Their slow walk seemed to take four times longer than it should have. He gripped Helen's arm. "Ernie *in* there?" John asked, feeling as if he were dreaming, or perhaps about to faint.

"In there." Helen smiled at him again, with her eyes half closed. "I came down and opened the back door, you see—and then I went up and woke Ernie. I said, 'Ernie, something's wrong in the factory, you'd better come down.' He came down and went in the back door—and I opened the coops with the lever. And then—I pulled the lever that opens the front doors. He was in the middle of the barn then, because I started a fire on the floor."

"A fire?" Then John noticed a pale curl of smoke rising over the front door.

"Not much to burn in there—just the grain," Helen said. "And there's enough for them to eat outdoors, don't you think?" She gave a laugh, and John shuddered. John pulled her faster toward the front of the barn. There seemed to be not much smoke. Now the whole lawn was covered with chickens and they were spreading through the white rail fence onto the road, pecking, cackling, screaming, a slow army without direction. It looked as if snow had fallen on the land.

"Head for the house!" John said, kicking at some chickens that were attacking Helen's ankles.

They went up to John's room. Helen knelt at the front window, watching. The sun was rising on their left, and now it touched the reddish roof of the metal barn. Gray smoke was curling upward from the horizontal lintel of the front doors. Chickens paused, stood stupidly in the doorway until they were bumped by others from behind.

The chickens seemed not so much dazzled by the rising sun—the light was brighter in the barn—as by the openness around them and above them. John had never before seen chickens stretch their necks just to look up at the sky. He knelt beside Helen, his arm around her waist.

"They're all going to—go away," John said. He felt curiously paralyzed.

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"Let them."

The fire would not spread to the house. There was no wind, and the barn was at least thirty yards away. John felt quite mad, like Helen, or the chickens, and was astonished by the reasonableness of his thought about the fire's not spreading.

"It's all over," Helen said, as nearly the last of the chickens wobbled out of the barn. She drew John closer by the front of his pajama top.

John kissed her gently, then more firmly on the lips. It was strange, stronger than any kiss he had ever known with a girl, yet curiously without further desire. The kiss seemed only an affirmation that they were both alive. They knelt facing each other and embracing tightly.

The cries of the hens had ceased to sound ugly, and now sounded only excited and puzzled. It was like an orchestra playing, some members stopping, others resuming their instruments, making a continuous chord but without a tempo.

John did not know how long they knelt like that, but at last his knees hurt, and he stood up, pulling Helen up, too. He looked out the window and said, "They must be all out. And the fire isn't any bigger. Shouldn't we—shouldn't we—"

But the obligation to look for Ernie seemed far away, not at all pressing. It was as if he had dreamed this night or this dawn, and Helen's kiss, the way he had dreamed about flying like Superman in the barn. Were they really Helen's hands in his now?

She slumped again, and plainly she wanted to sit on the carpet. So he left her and pulled on his jeans over his pajama pants. He went down and entered the barn cautiously by the front door. The smoke made the interior hazy, but when he bent low he could see fifty or more chickens pecking at something on the floor. Bodies of chickens overcome by smoke lay all around, like little white puffs of smoke themselves, and some live chickens were pecking at these.

John moved toward Ernie. He thought he had braced himself, but he hadn't braced himself enough for what he saw. He ran out again, very fast, because he had breathed once, and the smoke had nearly got him.

In his room Helen was humming and drumming on the window sill, gazing out at the chickens left on the lawn. The hens were trying to scratch in the grass, and were staggering, falling on their sides, but mostly falling backward, be-

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cause they were used to shuffling to prevent themselves from falling forward.

"Look!" Helen said, laughing so hard there were tears in her eyes. "They don't know what grass is! But they like it!"

John cleared his throat and said, "What're you going to say? What'll we say?"

"Oh—say." Helen seemed not at all disturbed by the question. "Well—that Ernie heard something and went down and—he wasn't completely sober, you know. And—maybe he pulled a couple of wrong levers.—Don't you think so?"

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDBOUNDS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Christie, Agatha	MURDER ON BOARD	Dodd, Mead	$7.95	8/19
Downing, Warwick	THE PLAYER	Saturday Review Press/Dutton	5.95	8/22
Lovesey, Peter	THE TICK OF DEATH	Dodd, Mead	5.95	8/19
Mallet, Jacqueline	THEY CAN'T HANG ME!	Harper & Row	5.95	8/28
McMullen, Mary	THE DOOM CAMPAIGN	Doubleday Crime Club	4.95	8/2
Price, Anthony	OCTOBER MEN	Doubleday Crime Club	4.95	8/9
Rosenblum, Robert	THE GOOD THIEF	Doubleday Crime Club	5.95	8/2
Watson, John H., M.D., & Meyer, Nicholas	THE SEVEN-PER-CENT SOLUTION	Dutton	6.95	8/26
Webb, Jean Francis	THE BRIDE OF CAIRNGORE	McKay	6.95	8/30

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Determinedly I refrained from stating that few alleged mystery writers now seem to attempt mystery, either because they won't or because they can't. A critic must avoid the pontifical, so often falsified in his own column.

This month, for instance, we begin with certain perplexities which despite their antiquarian aura become a fair-play detective novel classically wrought. We go on to legal analysis of the most famous real-life murder case in American crime, and conclude with two superior action thrillers, the second of them in paperback reprint. Richness or not, here's variety.

The Murders of Richard III, by Elizabeth Peters (Dodd, Mead, $6.95), spotlights some British savants and/or eccentrics who with many historians believe much-maligned King Richard guiltless of any crime five centuries ago. In fifteenth-century costume, enacting contemporary parts, they gather at the country house of Sir Richard Weldon to celebrate an innocence they hope to prove. Among the guests we find Thomas Carter, romantic-minded American scholar, and unromantic Jacqueline Kirby, American librarian of inquiring mind.

Whereupon—with fatality, a mockery of murder as though for grisly joke—somebody begins recreating the king's alleged deeds: by poisoning, by beheading, by smothering, by drowning in wine. The persecutor's last stroke goes so far beyond the grimmest jest as to suggest sheer devilry underneath.

At this crisis of nerves it's Jacqueline Kirby, not the most engaging detective, who solves our mystery. Despite the author's insistence on her charms, Ms. Kirby is so frantically detached and ironical that she alienates sympathy; she won't relax, and has never learned to play. But her shrewd eye fastens on evidence others have missed; in a strong finale, without police assistance, she nails the culprit and reveals villainy as consummate as any from the past. If you don't mind an irritating protagonist, the story is first rate.

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For fact-crime connoisseurs the ghastly fate of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew J. Borden at Fall River, Mass., is studied at some length in Robert Sullivan's *Goodbye Lizzie Borden* (Stephen Greene, $8.95).

At high noon of an August day, 1892, some malignant hand with a hatchet slaughtered wealthy Andrew J. and his second wife in the cramped little house they shared with Emma and Lizzie, the old man's daughters by a previous marriage, and an Irish maidservant named Bridget.

Thirty-two-year-old Lizzie, the enigmatic daughter, was arrested, tried, and, as a well-brought-up New England girl of the Christian Endeavor, triumphantly acquitted. Inheriting half her father's fortune, she bought a fine house in Fall River and lived there alone until her own death in 1927.

But did she do it, or didn't she? Controversy still simmers. In *Goodbye Lizzie Borden*, by a distinguished jurist, you will find little speculation. The facts, according to Judge Sullivan, allow only one answer. Whether or not you agree with him, he will stimulate your little gray cells all the way.

And now for two action thrillers both worth your attention.

Imperturbable Peter Craig, British Foreign Office, dominates Kenneth Benton's *Craig and the Jaguar* (Walker, $5.95), this time on a mission to Peru for M.I.6. He must rescue Jack Warne, young Englishman whose disappearance from the mountains, together with the stealing of Warne's report, disturbs British authority.

"Jaguar" refers to the fabled cat-god of the Andes, symbolized more by a feline-shaped mountain than by vicious Don Jorge Santa Cruz, dispossessed tycoon with a terrorist army. To rescue Jack Warne, as well as the girl who loves him, Craig literally flies in the face of the cat-god for a slam-bang, bullet-torn finish in which all honest souls can be happy.

For contemporary dirty work in northern Ireland, its own title best describes *The Savage Day*, by Jack Higgins (Fawcett, 95¢).

Major Simon Vaughan, formerly British Army, has been first railroaded to prison, then promised pardon if he will trap I.R.A. Leader Michael Cork and recover half a million in stolen gold.

On an expedition never straighforward but always deadly, aided by Norah Murphy and (of all people) by Michael Cork too, Vaughan faces treachery or crossfire from Belfast to Dublin and back again. He is still meeting surprises when a final surprise twist leaves us gasping but satisfied as we close the book.

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a NEW suspense story by

E. X. FERRARS

first publication in the United States

Mrs. Margery Gosse was 82, a widow, self-reliant, and independent-minded. But people in their eighties, especially when they live alone, are prone to accidents. Mrs. Gosse tripped, fell, and fractured a femur in her leg. Luckily she still had one blood relative, a niece, who insisted on taking care of Mrs. Gosse after she left the hospital. Luckily? Taking care? A story of "loneliness and fear and hopelessness" . . . .

UNDUE INFLUENCE

by E. X. FERRARS

"Why, Evelyn!" Mrs. Gosse exclaimed. "What a lovely surprise! I never dared to expect you."

"And how very, very naughty of you not to have let us know what happened straight away," Evelyn Hassall said, stooping to kiss the old wrinkled forehead, sallow against the snowy white of the pillows. "To leave it to that daily of yours to tell us—which it took her a fortnight to think of doing. We only had her letter this morning."

"Ah, Mrs. Jimson, so well-meaning, but she shouldn't have bothered you." Mrs. Gosse smiled up at her niece as she stood by the bedside, holding a bunch of jonquils and some magazines. "But it's sweet of you to have come, dear. I know what a busy life you lead."

"Well, really! The hospital people should have phoned me at once."

Mrs. Gosse was touched by the concern in Evelyn's voice. Yet the truth was that the old woman was a little surprised by it. It was two years since Evelyn had been over to see her, and

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Evelyn and Oliver lived only 50 miles away, a distance which, if they had happened to feel, say, like dropping in for lunch some Sunday, was nothing nowadays. So Mrs. Gosse had slipped into the habit of believing that her niece and her husband did not really want to be bothered too much about her.

That occasion, two years ago, when Evelyn, as now, had come over bearing gifts, had been Mrs. Gosse's eightieth birthday party. A lovely party. Her stepdaughter Judith, with her two little girls, had been there, and of course Mrs. Gosse's darling husband Andrew had still been alive then. He'd had his coronary about six months later, although he had been a year younger than his wife and no one had ever dreamed he would die before her. Evelyn and Oliver had not been able to come to the funeral because they had been away on a Caribbean cruise, but they had sent a beautiful wreath.

The strong scent of the jonquils that Evelyn now laid on the bedside locker, saying that she supposed a nurse would bring a vase for them if she rang, made Mrs. Gosse suddenly remember that wreath. And that made her think of death. Naturally she had been thinking of death a good deal since her accident, and sometimes it had been with a dreamy sort of fascination. But more often it had been with a quietly stubborn resistance. She did not want to die yet.

Evelyn sat down on the chair by the bed and undid the collar of her fur coat. She was a pretty woman in a pallid, fluffy-haired way, not much over 40 though she looked rather more, because behind the pink and white softness of her face there was a certain hardness of bone, a tightness of the muscles.

"Now tell me what happened," she said. "Mrs. Jimson isn't the most literate of letter writers."

"Well, dear, really nothing much happened," Mrs. Gosse replied. "I fell, that was all. I was on the way to the kitchen to get my breakfast, and you know those three steps in the passage—I just tripped there and fell. And I don't really remember much about it, because apparently I fainted—and d'you know, I've never, I mean never, fainted in my life before. Then when I came to I was here. So I hardly know anything about it.

"But I've been told Mrs. Jimson came in at her usual time and found me and got Dr. Bryant at once, and he called for an ambulance and sent me

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here. And it turns out that what I've got is a fractured femur and I'm going to be stuck here for quite a time. But really I'm very lucky, because I understand a good many people of my age would simply have got pneumonia and died. And they're so kind to me here—nuns, you know, mostly Irish—I've never been called 'darlin'' so often in my life before!"

"Well, it just shows I've always been right, doesn't it?" Evelyn said. "You shouldn't be living alone. I hope Oliver and I can persuade you to be more reasonable about that now."

Actually Mrs. Gosse could not remember when Evelyn had protested at her living alone. Judith, Andrew's daughter, had tried hard after Andrew's death to persuade her stepmother to live with her and her husband, Ronald. But Ronald, who was in the oil business, had just been posted to Venezuela, and Mrs. Gosse had not been able to see herself, past 80, pulling up all her roots and going to live in such a strange and distant place. Besides, loving as Judith and Ronald had always been to her and dearly as she loved their children, Mrs. Gosse had always had a dread of becoming a burden to others, particularly to those for whom she cared the most.

"Anyway, when they let you out, of course you'll come to us," Evelyn went on. "No, don't argue about it. You couldn't possibly go home alone. You must come and stay with us as long as you need to."

"That's very kind of you, dear," Mrs. Gosse said. "It's a very tempting suggestion. I suppose I'll find it rather difficult to manage on my own for a time. I'll think it over."

But really there was nothing to think over. It was obvious that even when Mrs. Gosse could move about on her two aluminum crutches and go to the bathroom by herself, she could not possibly have looked after herself in her own apartment, with only Mrs. Jimson coming in to help her in the mornings. It was inevitable that she should accept Evelyn's invitation. So when at last Mrs. Gosse left the hospital it was in an ambulance that was to carry her to the Hassalls' home.

Mrs. Gosse was rather dismayed by the ambulance. She had imagined she was well enough to make the journey by car. But Evelyn reminded her that her spare bedroom was on the second floor and that as Mrs. Gosse would not be able to manage the stairs, she would have to be carried upstairs on a stretcher. Regretfully Mrs. Gosse thought of her own apartment in which she would

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quite soon have been able to hobble out into the garden to look at the crocuses coming out under the beech trees and to sit on the bench there in any early spring sunshine that might brighten an occasional day, and to pick big yellow bunches of forsythia for the vases in the sitting room.

In the Hassalls' house she would be cooped up in one room until she could go up and down the stairs, and who knew how many weeks that would be? However, it was a very attractive room with pale gray walls and a dark red carpet and pearly white closets and some nice photographs of Greece on the walls and a beautiful little bathroom opening out of it.

Oliver carried Mrs. Gosse's luggage up for her. He was a short round man of 50, a stockbroker, with plump jowls and a bald head sparsely fringed with dark hair. His eyes were dark, rather protuberant, and looked oddly intense in the pink placidity of his face.

"You see, there's a lovely view from here," he said, waving at the window. "Nothing between you and the downs. You'll enjoy that, won't you? We thought of that when we asked you to come."

"How kind you both are, how very kind to me," Mrs. Gosse said, and just then would have been immensely pleased if she had been able to think of something more to say to make up to the Hassalls for the fact that in the past somehow she had never thought of them as particularly kind people. But no doubt there would be opportunities later to show her gratitude. She only added that she was feeling rather tired and would like to go to bed.

"And you're longing for a cup of tea too, aren't you?" Oliver said and hurried out so that Evelyn could help Mrs. Gosse undress and get into the bed in which the electric blanket had thoughtfully been turned on, waiting for her.

The next three weeks were very pleasant. It was true that Mrs. Gosse found them rather quiet. She missed the bustle of the nurses round her and the visits of her bridge-playing circle and of faithful Mrs. Jimson. Evelyn sat with her aunt when she could and Oliver generally paid her a visit when he got home from the City, but Evelyn lived a busy life, filled with voluntary work and committee meetings, and Oliver was usually tired in the evenings. And unfortunately the one thing the Hassalls' spare bedroom lacked was a telephone.

Mrs. Gosse loved chatting with her friends on the

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telephone and now that she was too far away for them to be able to drop in to see her, she would have liked to be able to ring them up and settle down for a nice long comfortable gossip. Always, of course, finding out from the operator how much the call had cost and paying the sum to Evelyn, for Mrs. Gosse would no more have thought of telephoning at the Hassalls' expense than of allowing them to pay for the stamps on the numerous letters she wrote to her friends and which Evelyn took away to mail for her.

It was the fact that none of these letters was answered that first began to worry Mrs. Gosse. She could not understand it. Her friends were not neglectful people. Always, when she or any of them had gone away on holiday, they had sent one another picture postcards. At Christmas, even when they were meeting every few days, they sent each other the season's greetings. And those who, because of infirmities or domestic problems, had not been able to visit her in the hospital had written to her.

But now there was silence. It seemed very odd. She began to get querulous about it and one day actually asked Evelyn if she was sure she had remembered to mail the letters.

Evelyn laughed and said, "Of course, darling. I don't forget things."

"But I haven't had any answers," Mrs. Gosse said. "I don't understand it."

"You're too impatient," Evelyn said. "Very few people answer letters by return mail. I know I never do."

"But you're quite, quite sure you did post my letters, aren't you?"

"Quite, quite sure."

Mrs. Gosse accepted it. Yet a nagging worry remained. She began to feel cut off from the world in a way that slightly scared her. But that, of course, was absurd. There was nothing for her to be afraid of. It was just that her relative helplessness and the long hours she sometimes had to spend quite alone were beginning to get on her nerves.

Then one day she and Oliver had a rather curious conversation.

It was Mrs. Gosse herself who thoughtlessly began it. Oliver had come into her room to bring her coffee after a particularly delicious dinner that Evelyn had cooked. She was an excellent cook and she understood how much it meant to an invalid to have a real meal served with shining silver and a pretty tray cloth. That evening there had even been a few

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snowdrops in a little glass jug on the tray. Mrs. Gosse was touched by the thoughtfulness.

"You're really so good to me, both of you," she said to Oliver. "You'll see, I won't forget it."

Rather to her surprise he answered with a self-conscious laugh. She had an odd feeling she had just said something for which he had been waiting. But he said, "Now, now, we don't want to talk about that sort of thing, do we?"

"But I mean it," she said. "You do so much for me and I couldn't bear it if you didn't understand how grateful I am."

"But there's no need to talk of things like that yet, is there?" he said. "Why, goodness me, I expect you'll outlive us all."

"Outlive—?"

Mrs. Gosse was startled. She realized he had thought, when she spoke of showing him and Evelyn that she would not forget their kindness, that she had been speaking of what she would leave them in her will. But in fact she had simply been thinking of making a present to Evelyn of a pearl and ruby brooch inherited by Mrs. Gosse from her grandmother, a very charming thing and probably quite valuable and which she was sure Evelyn would like. And Mrs. Gosse meant to think of something for Oliver, too. He was an incessant smoker and there was that gold cigarette case of Andrew's. Perhaps Oliver would like that.

But she did not want to embarrass Oliver by letting him know how he had misunderstood her.

"Oh, well," she said, "we all come to it sooner or later. There's no point in being afraid of thinking about it, is there?"

"Well, of course I've always hoped you'd remember Evelyn," he said, "But as the money was all Uncle Andrew's it wouldn't be surprising if you felt you had to leave your share of it to Judith."

As he spoke he was watching her with disconcerting intentness.

Mrs. Gosse sipped her coffee.

"No, perhaps it wouldn't," she said. "Of course, I made out my will thirty years ago and I've never thought of changing it. I remember when Andrew and I went along to the solicitor together and made our wills at the same time. Not that I had anything of my own to leave then. It was just to save trouble later if he should predecease me, as of course happened. We both agreed about the terms. They were very simple. Dearest Andrew, I should never think of doing anything I thought he wouldn't like."

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"No, no, of course not, of course not," Oliver said and his eyes seemed to fill with a hungry kind of curiosity, as if he were trying to determine if the ambiguity of her reply was the result of deliberate evasiveness or merely of aged muddle-mindedness. Then suddenly he went hurriedly out of the room and let the door shut behind him with a loudness that was almost a slam.

Mrs. Gosse put her coffee cup down quickly on the bedside table because her hands had started to tremble violently and she was afraid of spilling coffee on the flower-patterned sheets. Clasping her hands together, she lay there rigid in the comfortable bed, trying to think clearly and not let confusion and a perhaps utterly irrational panic overwhelm her.

She told herself that Oliver had never had much tact and that it was just like him, if he was curious about her will, to blurt it out as crudely as he had. And what more natural for him than to be curious? Yet there was a callousness about it, an indifference to her feelings, which offended Mrs. Gosse deeply.

For the question of what would happen to her modest fortune when she died could be of no interest to Oliver and Evelyn unless they had already talked freely to one another about her death. And she was only 82. Her mother had lived to 93 and her father to 97 and he had enjoyed a game of bowls on the very day of his death. And as longevity was said to run in families, wasn't it a little impatient, to say the least, of Oliver and Evelyn to be wondering about her will?

Unless—

Unless they had been told something in the hospital about her health that had been kept from her. Was her heart, for instance, not as strong as she believed? Was there anything the matter with her arteries? Had they some reason for expecting her to die soon? And was that why they were looking after her so assiduously, and while they were at it, keeping her virtually a prisoner, denying her all other human contact, perhaps never mailing the letters she had written, giving her no access to a telephone, and now beginning, when she was all too conscious of her complete dependence on them, to suggest to her that she should make a will in their favor?

No, that was all nonsense! She was letting her nerves get the best of her, allowing herself to be overcome by senile suspiciousness. Of course she was not a prisoner. She was

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being devotedly looked after. She ought to feel nothing but gratitude.

All the same she must think, she decided. She must think very clearly, without getting lost among hysterical thoughts and fancies. Lying still, except that her fingers plucked at the edge of the flowered sheet, she gazed at the ceiling and presently began to make what she thought was really a rather clever little plan. She meant it as something just to set her own mind at rest, and it would be so easy, so simple even for her to carry out that it seemed very sensible to try it. She would do it tomorrow.

Having decided on that, she dropped off almost at once into a pleasant doze, from which she did not awaken until Evelyn came into the room to settle her for the night and to give her her sleeping pills.

Mrs. Gosse put her plan into execution the next day, as soon as she heard Evelyn leave the house to do the shopping. Oliver, of course, had gone off to London some time before. So while Evelyn was out, Mrs. Gosse had the house to herself. Moving carefully and slowly, leaning on her crutches, she crossed her room to the door, opened it, went out into the hall, and hobbled along it to the door of Oliver's and Evelyn's bedroom. For there was a telephone extension in there. She had overhead both of the Hassalls speaking on it.

She had never suggested using it herself because this had never been offered and she regarded bedrooms as private places into which one did not intrude without an invitation. Yet really, with no one to see her, what was to stop her going in and ringing up, say, good Mr. Deane, her solicitor, and asking him to visit her?

She put a hand on the doorknob of the bedroom door. It did not open. It was locked. The Hassalls did not intend to let her reach that telephone extension to call Mr. Deane or anybody in the outer world. So her fears had not been crazy. She was, in fact, being held a prisoner.

With her heart beating in a way that frightened her, she made her way back to her room. At the head of the stairs she stood still and looked down. There was the front door. There was escape. If she gritted her teeth at the pain, could she somehow get down the stairs and reach the street?

But what would she do when she got there? Wave her crutches at passing cars? Hope some driver would not think she was mad and would give her a lift of 50 miles to her home?

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Probably before a car stopped Evelyn would return and gently force her back into the house and her captivity. And anyone who saw it happen would be on Evelyn's side.

For the moment there was nothing for it but patience.

It was soon after this that a subtle change came over Evelyn's attitude to Mrs. Gosse. All at once she seemed to have become very tired of looking after the old lady. She hardly spoke to her, there were no pretty tray cloths, and the meals she brought in as often as not consisted of meat of some sort out of a can and a lump of mashed potato that had certainly come out of a box. And Evelyn's face seemed to have become all bony jaw and veiled, resentful eyes.

One day, just as Evelyn was leaving the room, Mrs. Gosse said on an impulse, "Evelyn dear, don't you think it's time I was going home?"

Evelyn paused in the doorway. "So you want to leave us," she said.

"It's just that I think I've imposed on you long enough," Mrs. Gosse answered.

"You can go home tomorrow if you want to," Evelyn said.

Mrs. Gosse tried hard not to look startled. "Just whenever it's convenient for you, dear."

"Only tell me one thing first." Evelyn's voice suddenly grated. "Let's stop pretending, both of us. Oliver and I want to know if you've left us anything in your will or does everything go to Judith?"

"I don't think that's a very nice thing to talk about," Mrs. Gosse replied. "I'd sooner not discuss it."

"But we want to know where we stand. It won't hurt you to tell us. We aren't as well off as we look. Oliver isn't as clever as he thinks about money."

Mrs. Gosse considered her answer carefully.

"Well, you know everything I have was left to me by Andrew," she said. "And Judith is his daughter. You're actually no relation of Andrew's at all. I wouldn't say you have any right to his money."

"Didn't he leave half of what he had to Judith and half to you, without any strings to it?" Evelyn said. "I remember his saying so once. You can do what you like with your share."

"And you think I ought to make a will leaving it to you?"

"I do. We're your only blood relations."

"And if I make this will, I can go home?"

"As soon as you like."

"And if not?" Mrs. Gosse asked quietly.

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Evelyn hesitated, then seemed to make up her mind.

"After all, why should you ever go home?" she said with a tight little smile. "Your friends are already beginning to forget about you. When you first came here they were always ringing up to ask how you were, but it was quite easy to put them off and now they just think you've settled down with us and they've stopped worrying about you. You could stay on here in this nice room forever and ever and no one would ask any questions.

"And as I really find carrying trays up and down the stairs rather a tiring job, perhaps I might not bother with them quite as often as I do. And I might forget to change your library books. I don't mean, of course, that I'd ever do anything actually unkind, but you might find your life not quite as comfortable as it's been. And still no one would dream of interfering."

"But suppose I make a will of the kind you want," Mrs. Gosse said, "what's to stop me changing it when I get home?"

"If you promised you wouldn't change it, you wouldn't," Evelyn said. "That's what you're like."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure. You'd never change it."

"No," Mrs. Gosse said thoughtfully, "perhaps not."

For, promise or not, once she had made that will she would be given no chance to change it. She would never get home. What she understood clearly as the result of this extremely upsetting conversation was that the Hassalls were going to see to it that she never left their house alive.

Melodramatic as it sounded, that was the simple truth. It must be. No other explanation of their actions made sense. And she was in their hands, at their mercy.

After that day, as if she were already putting her threat into practice, Evelyn became more and more neglectful of Mrs. Gosse. Her food was often hardly edible. She had to struggle to make her own bed. The room was left to grow dusty and the sheets were not changed. And as she became better able to walk about she found, not much to her surprise, that she was locked into her room.

In a way she was glad to be left alone. She liked it better than those times when the Hassalls tried to make her discuss a new will. But sometimes she sat and cried from sheer loneliness and fear and hopelessness. The thought of giving in to them, trusting

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that at least the manner of her end would be merciful, began to seem almost attractive.

Then one afternoon, when she was in the bathroom, a noise in her bedroom startled her. It sounded as if the window had just been opened and closed. Then distinctly she heard footsteps and someone began to sing thickly and hoarsely.

"'When they call the roll up yonder, when they call the roll up yonder, when they call the roll up yonder, I'll be there. . .'"

A burglar?

A burglar who came in daylight and sang hymns? Hardly likely. Yet burglars seemed to do the oddest things nowadays. One was always reading about it. And perhaps this one might turn out to be a friend. Limping into the bedroom as fast as she could, she saw a small, stout, red-faced man busily cleaning her window.

The window cleaner. The one intruder whom the Hassalls had forgotten to keep out. And luckily, just then, Evelyn was away from the house, doing the shopping.

"Oh, good day," Mrs. Gosse exclaimed excitedly. "What a beautiful day it is, isn't it?"

For almost every conversation with a stranger should begin with a remark about the weather, shouldn't it? It always eased things. Besides, for the first time in some weeks, she had just noticed how brightly the sun was shining.

He took no notice.

"Good day," Mrs. Gosse repeated, louder.

He went on cleaning and singing.

She went closer to him and tapped him on the shoulder with a crutch.

He whirled, his hands coming up as if to defend himself. Then, seeing her, he gave a loose-lipped smile and said, "Oh, good afternoon, missus. Didn't know anyone was in. Mrs. Hassall always says, if I come when she's out to go ahead on my own and she'll pay me next time. Nice day, isn't it?"

Mrs. Gosse's heart sank. She could smell the beer on his breath. He was, she realized, both drunk and deaf.

She tested how deaf he was by raising her voice and repeating as loudly as she could, "It's a beautiful day."

He gave her a dubious stare, considered the situation, then said, as if he knew that it was a safe thing to say in almost any circumstances, "That's right." Then he returned to cleaning the window.

Mrs. Gosse stumbled hastily

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to the table where her writing paper and envelopes were. She lowered herself into the chair and began feverishly writing. Before she was half finished the window cleaner began to climb out of the window onto his ladder. She reached out with one of her crutches and jabbed him sharply. When he turned with a look of hurt protest she held up a finger, beckoning to him, and shouted, "Wait!"

He stayed where he was uncertainly.

Under the address she had scrawled at the top she wrote, "Dear Mr. Deane, I am being kept here against my will. I am in fear of my life. Please come and rescue me. This is urgent, very urgent. Yours sincerely, Margery Gosse."

She folded the sheet of paper, slid it into an envelope, and addressed it. She had an uneasy feeling that what she had written might sound merely insane. If she had more time to think she might have written more temperately. But the window cleaner was looking as if he might decide to descend his ladder at any moment. Then she realized she had no stamps. Taking 50 pence out of her handbag, she handed it to him with the letter, pointed at the corner where the stamp should be, and shouted, "Please! Please post it for me!"

At the sight of the 50 pence his face split into a grin.

"Thank you, missus," he said. "Very good of you. Thank you."

"But please post the letter!" In her own ears her pleading voice sounded hopelessly thin and ineffectual.

"That's right," he said cheerfully, then pocketing the money and holding the letter he disappeared.

Mrs. Gosse looked down after him. She saw him reach the bottom of the ladder, look at the letter in his hand in a puzzled way as if he wondered how he had come by it, then crumple it into a ball and drop it on a flowerbed.

Mrs. Gosse shouted down to him to be sure to post the letter, but the man moved on and was quickly out of sight.

She collapsed into a chair. For a few minutes she gave in to helpless sobbing. The bitter disappointment after the few minutes of exalted hope left her feeling far more desperate than she had before. She felt more exhausted than she ever had in her life. A cloud of blackness settled on her mind. Utter despair enveloped her.

Now, she knew, there was nothing left for her but the gamble she had been thinking about recently. A most fearful gamble. The thought of it ter-

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rified her. For it was only too likely to fail. But if it did, did she really care? Might that not be better than letting things go on as they were now? All the same, but for the agonizing disappointment of having seen her letter crumpled and dropped on the earth, she would probably never have had the courage to act.

As it was, she sat still, thinking, for what seemed a very long time. She had never been a gambler by nature. She enjoyed her bridge, but never for more than twopence a hundred, and once, when she and Andrew had been in Monte Carlo, she had become very agitated when he had risked a mere ten pounds at roulette. Yet here she was, thinking of risking all that she had. Literally all. Her life.

At last she got up, and staggering more than usual, from nervousness and a kind of confusion, she went into the bathroom, took her sleeping pills out of the medicine cabinet, and counted them. There were 47 in the bottle. And the lethal dose, she had once been told, was about 30. But when you were 82, perhaps it would not take so many to kill you. How could you tell? You must just guess and hope for the best.

Above all, you must not take too few. That would be useless. Counting out 30, she flushed them down the toilet. Then with shaking hands she filled a glass of water and set herself to swallowing the 17 remaining pills.

She was surprised at how calm she became while she was doing it. Walking back into her bedroom, she turned the cover of the bed down neatly, took off her shoes, and lay down. While she was waiting for the drug to begin to affect her she found the words of the hymn that the window cleaner had sung going round in her head. "When they call the roll up yonder. . ." Dimly the words comforted her.

She was far gone by the time Evelyn came in with her supper tray. Loud snoring noises came from the inert figure on the bed and the aged face on the pillow was paper-white. Evelyn stood still, staring, then shouted, "Oliver! Oliver, come at once!"

He pounded up the stairs.

"Look!" Evelyn cried.

"Oh, God, what's happened? What's she done?" he gasped.

Evelyn dumped the tray she had been clutching onto the table and shot into the bathroom. She came back with the empty bottle.

"It's her sleeping pills. She's taken the lot. What fools we've been, leaving them here! Why didn't we think she might do this?"

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"How many were there?"

"Nearly fifty, I think."

"Then she hasn't a hope."

"What are we going to do? This isn't how we planned things. There'll be questions, a post-mortem. . .Oh, Lord, when I think of all the time I've spent on her—"

"Be quiet, let me think."

"We'd better get the doctor."

"Yes, yes, of course, that's unavoidable. But the question is, do we do it now or—when it's over?"

"It had better be now," Evelyn said. "If she's going to die anyway, it's going to look better if we do everything we can to save her. It might even give us some sort of claim on her estate."

"You can forget that now. That damned Judith will get it all. And suppose she comes round. Wouldn't it be better to wait? We can't have her talking."

"She'll never come round. Go and phone the doctor. We can tell him she was convinced she'd never walk properly again and that it has been depressing her. Go on."

"And you'd better do some cleaning up in here," Oliver said. "The place looks filthy. We've got to make it plain we've been doing everything we could for the woman. Hurry."

He went quickly to the telephone extension in the bedroom. Evelyn, giving the figure on the bed a look of the deepest malignancy, set about dusting and tidying.

Mrs. Gosse, in her deep coma, went on with her unconscious struggle for life, drawing one breath after another into her laboring lungs. The effort of each breath seemed to use up more of her vitality than she could possibly afford. She looked far too wasted and fragile to survive till rescuers came.

It was morning when she recovered consciousness in the hospital. Through a fog she became aware of people coming and going, of a bright young face under a starched cap bending over her, of voices nearby and of someone saying, "She'll do."

She could not think how it had come about. Her memory was a blank. But a sense of wonderful peace enveloped her. There was something beautiful about seeing human faces round her and the two rows of beds filled with other sick people in the long emergency ward. She smiled vaguely at a man who was standing by her bedside and murmured, "Are you from the police?"

"Of course not, I'm a doctor," he said. "And a lot of trouble you've given me. If you

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weren't as strong as a horse, we'd never have pulled you through. But we don't need the police just because you took a few too many of your pills, do we? That's all that happened, isn't it? You lost count. We don't need the police just because you were a little careless."

"The police," she said softly, as if the word charmed her, then she drifted off into a normal sleep from which she did not wake up for several hours.

When she awoke, Evelyn Hassall, holding a bunch of lilacs, was standing at the side of her bed.

Mrs. Gosse raised her head a little from the pillow and began to scream, "Nurse, nurse, nurse!"

Her mind was as clear as it had ever been.

"Shh, darling, don't, you'll disturb everyone," Evelyn said. She looked hollow-eyed, as if she had not slept during the past night, but she smiled sweetly.

"Nurse, nurse!" Mrs. Gosse shrieked.

The heads of the other patients in the ward turned toward her. A nurse came running.

"Now, now, what's this?" she said. "This is your niece, Mrs. Hassall. Don't you recognize her? She sat up all night while we worked on you and it was touch and go. She'll take you home again as soon as you're strong enough."

"Don't let her come near me!" Mrs. Gosse shouted so that everyone could hear. "She gave me that stuff to drink! She tried to kill me! I told her I was going to change my will because she and her husband were so unkind to me and she gave me all that poison in my tea before I could call my lawyer. My lawyer, Mr. Deane, I want to see him! Now! I want to see him at once because I mean to change my will immediately and leave everything I have to my stepdaughter Judith."

"*Change* your—?" Evelyn began.

"Yes, yes, I'd left everything to you, you knew that," Mrs. Gosse answered furiously. "When Andrew and I made our wills he said to me he was providing for Judith himself and that what he was leaving me was mine absolutely and that I should leave it, if I wanted to, to my own kith and kin. So I left it all to you and you would have had it if you hadn't been too impatient. Trying to poison me, that's further than I thought even you would go, and that's murder. Nurse, I want the police. I want to charge that wicked woman

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with trying to kill me."

"But I didn't know about your will. . .you didn't say. . . and I didn't give you anything, you took it yourself!" Evelyn's eyes were wide and frightened in her pallid face. Her bony jaw trembled.

Suddenly she turned and went running out of the ward, dropping the lilacs as she ran.

Mrs. Gosse gave a deep sigh. Settling herself more comfortably in the high hard bed, she smiled up at the nurse.

"Of course, I knew there was something wrong with the tea as soon as I tasted it," she said. "But I thought perhaps the teapot hadn't been washed out properly. My niece is not as careful a housekeeper as she might be. But I didn't want to make a fuss. I never make a fuss if I can help it. And naturally I never thought of murder. But I'm afraid there's really no question of it. So now, dear, I'd really like to see someone from the police. After all, poisoners nearly always try again."

The nurse gazed at her with a look of shock on her face, then went hurrying away to consult her superior.

Perhaps because Mrs. Gosse was not wearing her false teeth, which were in a glass by her bedside, her gentle features looked more shrunken than usual, more hollow, so that her jawbone stood out, giving it almost as hard an outline as that of her niece Evelyn.

"Q"

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We found this story, believe it or not, in a periodical called "House Magazine," the privately printed house organ of Barclays Bank of London.

The author, Peter Moulding, has been associated with Barclays Bank for a considerable part of his life. He joined Barclays in Sheffield, England, in 1932, was transferred to Dominion Colonial Offices in 1937, and served in Egypt and East Africa where he became a Local Director. During World War II he was a pilot in the RAF, attaining the rank of Squadron Leader. In 1962 he returned to Barclays, traveled widely in DCO territories, before retiring to Somerset in 1970. Now his main occupations are "writing, birdwatching, and exercising unruly dogs". . .

KILLING BY INCHES

by PETER MOULDING

It was after seven o'clock in the evening. He had been home nearly half an hour and, in the slanting sunshine, was sitting on the patio drinking a whiskey and soda. Although he was over 40, his sleek black hair showed no trace of gray and his figure was still lithe and athletic. Slate eyes, thin lips and clear-cut features gave him a cold, esthetic look, highly intelligent and very handsome.

He heard her come in and when she walked out into the sunshine he didn't look at her.

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"Where have you been?" he asked.

"To the doctor, Paul. I told you this morning, darling. Have you forgotten?"

"Of course I hadn't forgotten, but I didn't know you were going to be so late." His tone was irritable.

She looked at him, but his eyes were hard, away in the distance watching the sunset.

"I'm sorry, darling, were you worried? Thought I'd had a crash or something?"

At last he turned to look at her.

Ten years ago the slate gray would have melted into tender laughter. He'd have called her a little goose, lifted her up and swung her round. He'd have said, as he once did, "I'm always worried when I can't see you around." But now the slate gray was blank. She felt, rather than saw, the slight indifferent shrug. She heard the exasperation of a deep intake of breath.

"No, not worried," he said cruelly, "just hungry."

"I'll get it now," she said. "It won't take long."

As she went through the French window, she hesitated and turned to speak again.

"Don't you want to know. . . ." she stopped.

"Don't I want to know what?" he asked, looking away again at the sunset.

"Oh, nothing."

She went off to the kitchen. Of course he didn't want to know anything. He never wanted to know anything.

Anne was in her mid-thirties. Once she had been a pretty little blonde, but now she looked older than her years. Her hair was a metallic platinum, showing along the parting the light brown of its natural color. Her face was pale and her eyes tired.

She stood tensely over the gas stove, drinking sherry out of a tumbler.

When the food was ready she went to the sitting-room door and called him. Two or three minutes later he joined her in the dining room and, sitting down, looked at the food.

"Spaghetti bolognaise again," he said, laughing in barely concealed criticism.

"It's easy to make," she said, "and you used to like it, darling."

He helped himself to a small portion.

"It's all right," he said, "or would have been an hour ago. Funny how one's appetite goes over the hump, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Paul, but—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Anne, do stop being sorry about everything. I think a bottle of wine would be a good thing to wash this stuff down."

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She jumped to her feet. Then she saw the look in his eyes and sat down again. Dear God, could she never do anything right for this man?

When he came back from the pantry, he poured out the drink and, for one second, she saw the old sweet smile as he raised his glass.

"To us, my dear," he said. "Get well soon!"

She wanted to say "Thank you" but the words wouldn't come. The tears were prickling behind her eyes. If only he could always be nice like this! She twisted the spaghetti round her fork, but somehow couldn't bring herself to respond to his toast.

He would get angry if she cried.

After a minute or two of silence he put his fork down, leaving his food unfinished.

"All right, Anne, if you've nothing to say, I give up."

With that he left the table. In the cupboard he found himself a cigar. Notching the end with his penknife, he left her.

Of course the tears came, over the sink at the washing up.

What had the doctor said? Relax! Lie down and relax! How could she ever relax when Paul was like this?

The work finished, she crept upstairs and lay on her bed. She could hear the television below. After an hour she got up, took off her clothes, and put on her nightdress. A few minutes later, hopelessly, she took two sleeping pills.

About midnight he went up to her. She was breathing heavily. When he touched her on the cheek she did not respond. Smiling he went down to the sitting room and picked up the telephone.

"Hello, darling," he said, "I think the treatment is going well. Quite well." Then, after a pause, "I'll keep in touch," he said.

About four o'clock in the morning she woke up. She had been driving the car and no matter how hard she pushed with her foot, the brakes wouldn't work. Somewhere, she didn't know where, she'd gone into the sea. He'd been there but he was looking away into the sunset and when she called out he just went on lighting his cigar.

She switched on the bedside lamp. His bed was empty and undisturbed.

Then the usual symptoms began: the feeling of tightness in her chest, difficulty in getting her breath, her heart somewhere up in her throat tapping away in fits and starts, self-control beginning to melt

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into a cold sweat of panic.

"Relax," the psychiatrist had said, "it's nothing but nerves, my dear. You may feel you're passing out, but you never do, do you?"

Relax, relax, relax! So easy to say, so difficult to do!

Propping herself up on the pillows, she closed her eyes and tried hard to breathe slowly and deeply. Eventually the sweating subsided and the worst of the attack was over. It was only then, ironically enough, that she was able to open the drawer of her bedside table and find the tranquilizer.

A little later utter calmness came and with it the usual self-examination.

Why was it, when she knew so well the source of her own illness, that she had lied persistently to the psychiatrist? All those stories about not being able to have a family; her fear of an incurable disease; the traumas of childhood; hatred of the dark; claustrophobia. It was all nonsense. But she couldn't bring herself to tell him about what she knew was her love-hate relationship with Paul. The bitterness, the jealousy offset by his magnetism, his terrible, overwhelming attraction from which she could not break free.

She knew only too well that these attacks of panic bore a direct relationship to what Paul had said or done or indicated by some gesture or expression. Perhaps this was why, so often in the early hours of the morning, she thought of suicide. She couldn't live without Paul and yet she knew instinctively that there was no future happiness in life with him. Not the way he was treating her now. Not when he was killing her with little inches of indifference.

She put on her dressing gown and walked out to the landing. Opening the door of his dressing room, she switched on the light. He was lying there seemingly fast asleep. As she watched he opened his eyes.

"What is it?" he asked. "What the devil do you want?"

"I just wondered where you were, darling."

"Where the hell did you think I was, Anne? I didn't want to disturb you. You're so bloody restless."

"I'm sorry, Paul," she said.

He turned over and pulled the sheet up to his neck.

"Put the light out," he said, his face in the pillow.

Back in her bed, for the next hour she tossed and turned. Why? Why was he like this? Ever since she'd been ill he had been hard and critical, but he had never been so desperately unkind.

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As the light came into the eastern sky, again she had a feeling of panic. Today, of all days, she must be at her best. It was important. At length, exhausted, she fell into a deep sleep.

When she woke, the summer sun was already high in the sky. At first she had an unusual feeling of well-being, as if there were really something to live for. Then she remembered. This was, of course, a very big day. She threw back the bedclothes and, crossing to the window, pulled the curtains aside.

It was one of those hazy, lazy August days when there is no wind, when the flowers droop and the apples look heavy on the trees. She could hear the drone of the bees already well ahead on their long day's work. Then she saw the deck chairs—Paul must have forgotten to put them away. Paul! The feeling of apprehension came again as she thought about the happenings of the previous evening.

In the dressing room the bed had been made and his pajamas were folded neatly on the pillow. Downstairs the table was cleared and his breakfast things washed up. A year or two ago, when she was fit and well, she would have felt grateful—how sweet of Paul to be so considerate. But now she saw it as an action designed to highlight her own inadequacy. He'd done it to show her how unnecessary she had become. Hopelessly she looked round for some little message, something to show he had remembered. Perhaps he'd ring.

Then it started again—the jellyfish at the back of the head. It had all the unpleasantness of a sting without the speed of shock. It started as a tingle and grew slowly, inexorably, until it felt as if the right side of her head were drying up, congealing into an unbearable, prickling pain.

Unsteadily she made for the sideboard and poured herself a large gin. Sitting in a hard chair at the head of the table—*his* chair—slowly it all began to melt. Out of the corners of her mind she collected her courage. She would have to hurry if she were to get to the hairdresser by 11:30; and then there was all the shopping to do—and the champagne.

What was the one he liked? Veuve Cliquot? But what was the year? Never mind, she'd ask the man in the store. And she mustn't forget the paper for his present. One always had to wrap things up attractively.

It was a very hot and thundery afternoon. When she got back she began, far too

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early, to get things ready. The table, the shining candlesticks, the flowers, the asparagus in the silver dish, the artichoke hearts, the champagne on ice, the grouse in the oven, the little square box wrapped up with a bit of pink ribbon.

Then the waiting began—waiting long before there was any hope of his coming—a desperate feeling he might perhaps come early and knowing very well he wouldn't.

She watched the news and had a whiskey. At half-past six she went to the station. They came out one by one; two bowler hats, a typist in a mini, a pale-blue secretary, clerical grays, unnecessary umbrellas, *Evening Standards*, brief cases, black shoes still with their morning shine, all coming out of the underground passage. The City was spewing out its tadpoles into suburbia.

After they had gone, she sat in the car for several minutes. Then back home, where she turned the oven down. She took her drink into the garden, twisting the ice round and round in her glass of whiskey.

At eight o'clock she heard the nightingale, utterly pure, hesitant, climbing to mountain-tops of ecstasy. When all was quiet and the sun had gone, she went into the house. She knew then that he hadn't forgotten. He just had no wish to remember. That's what made the dizziness and the jellyfish.

She ate a few pieces of asparagus and threw the remainder in the garbage can. Of the champagne she drank one glass and then poured the rest down the sink. She took the grouse from the oven and left it on the kitchen table, the carving knife and fork ready for him. After that she made the coffee.

At ten o'clock when he still had not arrived, she went upstairs and, sitting on the bed, she counted out the sleeping pills. There would be more than enough. She tore a page from her diary, today's page, August 17. On it she wrote:

I'm sorry I've failed you, Paul. I know you don't worry any more. The grouse is on the table and your coffee is in the pot on the stove. Funny how one's appetite goes over the hump! Anne

She read it several times; thought of changing it, but finally left it as it was. She emptied out the sleeping pills and left the note folded under the bottle.

It was well after midnight when he came in. The light was on in the hall. So was the

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bedside lamp. Her breathing was slow and heavy. He lifted her eyelid a fraction and could just see the edge of her iris, tucked away under her brow; the rest was white—dead and seemingly lifeless. She looked to be already in a coma.

Great, he thought, great! He saw the bottle which had held the sleeping pills. He read the note. Stupid little woman—for once she had done things properly!

He went downstairs to the telephone.

"Hello, darling. The treatment's going great. Tomorrow I think you'll get some news. Perhaps it would be a good thing if we were to avoid each other for a few weeks. Just a few weeks, darling! No, no, my sweet, everything's all right. I shall have some coffee and a brandy. In the morning, I think, it will be all over."

He sat on the chair by the telephone. After a while he poured brandy into a tumbler, then warmed up the coffee on the gas stove.

Seven-thirty in the morning was about the right time to phone the police. It was the normal waking-up time and if someone happened to die in the night it was about the time you would find them pale and stiff in their beds.

The police came very quickly: Ten minutes later a doctor arrived. They asked lots of questions, of course. The doctor was convinced it was barbiturate poisoning, but there would have to be a post-mortem.

The police were kind. They waited until the ambulance came to remove the body. It was so much a clear case of suicide that they felt impelled to express some sort of compassion. There was a chapter on this sort of thing in the police training manual. It wasn't often they had occasion to follow its dictates. But here it was. They were very helpful.

When the body had gone they were happy to accept the offer of coffee. In the sitting room they mopped their brows in the humid August atmosphere. It had been quite a morning, one way or another.

In the kitchen, making the coffee, Anne took down the pot which, an hour or two ago, she had carefully scalded with boiling water—just before telephoning the police.

"Q"

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a LEW ARCHER novelet by

ROSS MACDONALD

Of all the major detective divisions the one that has probably been represented least often in EQMM, especially in recent years, is the Hammett-Chandler subdivision à la Black Mask. Why this is so we are not sure. The Hammett-Chandler type of 'tec, with its virility and violence, its guts, gore, and gals, its blood, busts, and bludgeons, is a purely American species, and that alone is enough to recommend its regular publication in an American magazine. Perhaps after the long run of Hammetts in the earlier years of EQMM we were spoiled; perhaps we became too hard to please, and as a result were unable to find truly satisfying rough-tough private-eye stories: the Hammett-Chandler school is easy to imitate—so easy that the imitations often read like parodies. (But then perhaps we are all epigones of Poe.)

The writer today who most distinctively carries on the great tradition of quality in the so-called hardboiled story, who in some respects has gone beyond Hammett and Chandler, is Ross Macdonald. His private eye, Lew Archer, originally (to quote his creator) "came out from under Hammett's black mask"; but he soon achieved a character and personality of his own. Yes, Lew Archer is unquestionably his own man . . .

Ross Macdonald's listing in EQMM's Who's Who is nearly 30 years old. It was EQMM that published his first short story, "Find the Woman" by Kenneth Millar (Ross Macdonald's real name), in our issue of June 1946.

Now, hit the 'tec trail again with Lew Archer—in a case that might have been called "Prayer in the Dust" . . .

"Q"

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THE SINISTER HABIT

by ROSS MACDONALD

A man in a conservative dark gray suit entered my doorway sideways, carrying a dark gray Homburg in his hand. His face was long and pale. He had black eyes and eyebrows and black nostrils. Across the summit of his high forehead long black ribbons of hair were brushed demurely. Only his tie had color: it lay on his narrow chest like a slumbering purple passion.

His sharp black glance darted around my office, then back into the corridor. His hairy nostrils sniffed the air as if he suspected escaping gas.

"Is somebody following you?" I said.

"I have no reason to think so."

I had my coat off and my shirt unbuttoned. It was a hot afternoon at the start of the smog season. My visitor looked at me in a certain way that reminded me of schoolteachers. "Might you be Archer?"

"It's a reasonable conclusion. Name's on the door."

"I can read, thank you."

"Congratulations, but this is no talent agency."

He stiffened, clutching his blue chin with a seal-ringed hand, and gave me a long, sad, hostile stare. Then he shrugged awkwardly, as though there was no help for it.

"Come in if you like," I said. "Close it behind you. Don't mind me, I get snappy in the heat."

He shut the door violently, almost hard enough to crack the expensive one-way glass panel. He jumped at the noise it made, and apologized: "I'm sorry. I've been under quite a strain."

"You're in trouble?"

"Not I. My sister. . ." He gave me one of his long looks. I assumed an air of bored discretion garnished with a sprig of innocence.

"Your sister," I reminded him after a while. "Did she do something, or get something done to her?"

"Both, I'm afraid." His teeth showed in a tortured little smile which drew down the corners of his mouth. "She and I maintain a school for girls in—in the vicinity of Chicago. I can't emphasize too much the importance of keeping this matter profoundly secret."

"You're doing your part. Sit down, Mr.—"

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He took a pinseal wallet out of his inside breast pocket, handling it with a kind of reverence, and produced a card. He hesitated with the card in his hand.

"Let me guess," I said. "Don't tell me. Does your name begin with a consonant or a vowel?"

He sat down with great caution, after inspecting the chair for concealed electrodes, and made me the gift of his card. It was engraved: "J. Reginald Harlan, M.A. The Harlan School."

I read it out loud. He winced.

"All right, Mr. Harlan. Your sister's in some kind of a jam. You run a girls' school—"

"She's headmistress. I'm registrar and bursar."

"—which makes you vulnerable to scandal. It is sexual trouble she's in?"

He crossed his legs, and clasped his sharp knee with both hands. "Now how could you possibly know that?"

"Some of my best friends are sisters. I take it she's younger than you."

"A few years my junior, yes, but Maude's no youngster. She's a mature woman, at least I'd always supposed that she was mature. It's her age, her age and position, that makes this whole affair so incredible. For a woman of Maude's social and professional standing, with a hundred virginal minds in her charge, suddenly to go mad over a man! Can you understand such behavior?"

"Yes. I've seen enough of it."

"I can't." But a faint, attractive doubt softened his eyes for a moment. Perhaps he was wondering when some long overdue lightning might blast and illuminate him. "I'd always supposed that the teens were the dangerous age. Perhaps after all it's the thirties." One hand crawled up his chest like a pallid crab and fondled the purple tie.

"It depends on the person," I said, "and the circumstances."

"I suppose so." He inverted the hat in his lap and gazed down into it. "Now that I come to think of it, Mother's breakdown occurred when she was in her thirties. I wonder, could Maude be simply reverting to type, impelled by something unstable in her genes?"

"Did Mother have blue genes?"

Harlan smiled his tortured smile. "Indeed she did. You put it very aptly. But we won't go into the case of Mother. It's my sister I'm concerned with."

"What did she do? Elope?"

"Yes, in the most scandalous

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and disrupting way, with a man she scarcely knew, a dreadful sort of man."

"Tell me about him."

He looked down into his hat again, as if its invisible contents fascinated and horrified him. "There's very little to tell. I don't even know his name. I saw him only once, last Friday—a week ago tomorrow. He drove up to the school in a battered old car, right in the midst of our Commencement exercises. Maude didn't even introduce him to me. She introduced him to no one, and if you saw him you would understand why. He was an obvious roughneck, a big hairy brute of a fellow with a red beard, in filthy old slacks and a beret and a turtleneck sweater. She walked up to him in front of all the parents and took his arm and strolled away with him under the elms, completely hypnotized."

"You mean she never came back?"

"Oh, she came back that night for a time, long enough to pack. I was out myself—I had a number of social duties to perform, Commencement night. When I got in, she was gone. She left me a brief note, and that was all."

"You have it with you?"

His hand went into his breast pocket and tossed a sheet of folded stationery onto the desk. Its copybook handwriting said:

Dear Reginald:

I am going to be married. My total despair of making you understand forces me to leave as I am leaving. Do not worry about me, and above all do not try to interfere. If this seems cruel, bear in mind that I am fighting for life itself. My husband-to-be is a great and warm personality who has suffered in his time as I have suffered. He is waiting outside for me now.

Be assured, dear Reginald, that a part of my affection will remain with you and the school. But I shall never return to either.

Your sister

I pushed the note across the desk to Harlan. "Were you and your sister on good terms?"

"I'd always thought so. We had our little differences over the years, in carrying on Father's work and interpreting the tradition of the School. But there was deep mutual respect between Maude and me. You can see it in the note."

"Yes." I could see other things there, too. "What's the suffering she refers to?"

"I have no idea." He gave a cruel yank to the purple tie. "We've had a good life together, Maude and I, a rich full life of

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service to girlhood and young womanhood. We've been prosperous and happy. To have her turn on me like this—out of a clear sky! Suddenly, after eleven years of devotion, the School meant nothing to her, *I* meant nothing to her. Father's memory meant nothing. I tell you, that brute has bewitched her. Her entire system of values has been subverted."

"Maybe she's just fallen in love. The older they are when it happens, the harder it hits them. Hell, maybe he's even lovable."

Harlan sniffed. "He's a lewd rascal. I know a lewd rascal when I see one. He's a womanizer and a drinker and probably worse."

I glanced at my liquor cabinet. It was closed and innocent-looking. "Aren't you a little prejudiced?"

"I know whereof I speak. The man's a ruffian. Maude is a woman of sensibility who requires the gentlest conditions of life. He'll pulverize her spirit, brutalize her body, waste her money. It's Mother's situation all over again, only worse, much worse. Maude is infinitely more vulnerable than Mother ever was."

"What happened to your mother?"

"She divorced Father and ran away with a man, an art teacher at the School. He led her a merry life, I assure you, until he died of drink." This seemed to give Harlan a certain satisfaction. "Mother is living in Los Angeles now. I haven't seen her for nearly thirty years, but Maude came out to visit her during the Easter recess. Against my expressed wishes, I may add."

"And Maude came back to Los Angeles with her husband?"

"Yes. She wired me yesterday from here. I caught the first possible plane."

"Let me see the telegram."

"I don't have it. It was read to me on the telephone." He added waspishly: "She might have used a less public means of communicating her disgrace."

"What did she say?"

"That she was very happy. Turning the knife in the wound, of course." His face darkened, and through his eyes I caught a glimpse of the red fires banked inside him. "She warned me not to try and follow her, and apologized for taking the money."

"What money?"

"She wrote a check last Friday before she left, which nearly exhausted our joint checking account. A check for a thousand dollars."

"But it belonged to her?"

"In the legal sense, not

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morally. It's always been understood that I disburse the money." A doleful whine entered his voice. "The man is clearly after our money, and the deuce of it is, there's nothing to prevent Maude from drawing on our capital. She might even sell the School!"

"She owns it?"

"I'm afraid she does, legally. Father left her the School. I—my administrative ability was a little slow in developing—a gradual growth, you know. Poor Father didn't live to see me mature." He coughed, choking on his own unction. "The buildings alone are worth nearly two hundred thousand. The added value of our prestige is incalculable."

He paused in a listening attitude, as though he could hear the unholy gurgle of money going down the drain. I put on my coat.

"You want them traced, is that it? To see that the marriage is regular, and make sure that he isn't a confidence man?"

"I want to see my sister. If I could just *talk* to her—well, something might be saved. She may have lost her mind. I can't permit her to wreck her life, and mine, as Mother wrecked Father's and her own."

"Where does your mother live in Los Angeles?"

"She has a house in a place called Westwood, I believe. I've never been there."

"I think we ought to visit her. You haven't been in touch with her?"

"Certainly not. And I have no wish to see her now."

"I think you should. If Maude was out here with her at Easter, your mother may know the man. It doesn't sound as though your sister eloped on the spur of the moment."

"You may be right," he said slowly. "It hadn't occurred to me that she may have met him out here. And then he followed her to Chicago, eh? Of course. It's the logical hypothesis."

We had a short talk about money. Harlan endorsed a fifty-dollar Traveler's Check to me, and we went downstairs to my car.

It wasn't far to Westwood, as distances go in Los Angeles. We joined the early evening traffic rushing like lemmings toward the sea and the suburbs. Shielding his eyes with his hand against the sun's horizontal rays, Harlan told me a little about his mother. Enough for me to know what to expect.

She lived in a frame cottage on a hillside overlooking the distant campus. The front yard was choked with a dozen varieties of cactus, some of which speared as high as the roof. The house needed paint

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and it hung on the slope a little off balance, like its tenant.

She opened the screen door, blinking against the sun. Her face was gouged and eroded by years and trouble. Black hair, shot with gray, hung in straight limp bangs over her forehead. Large tarnished metal rings depended from her earlobes. Several gold chains hung around her withered neck, and tinkled when she moved. She was dressed in sandals and a brown homespun robe which looked like sacking, cinched in by a rope at the waist.

Her eyes were dusty black and very remote. She didn't seem to know Harlan. He said in a new voice, a husky whisper: "Mother?"

She peered at him, and her face organized itself in wrinkles around her brightening eyes. She smiled. Her teeth were tobacco-colored, but her smile was generous. It turned to laughter. Red-stained by the sun, she looked like an old gypsy on a *vino* jag.

"My God in heaven! You're Reginald."

"Yes." He took off his hat. "I fail to see what you're laughing about, however."

"It's just," she gasped, "you look so much like your father."

"Is that so comical? I hope I do. I've patterned my life on Father's, tried to live up to his code. I only wish I could say as much for Maude."

Her laughter died. "You've no right to criticize Maude. She's worth two of you, and you know it. Maude's a fine woman."

"A fine fool!" he said hotly. "Throwing herself away, embezzling money—"

"Watch your language. Maude is my daughter." The old woman had a certain dignity.

"She's very much your daughter, apparently. Is she here with you?"

"No, she's not. I know why you've come, of course. I warned Maude you'd try and drag her back to the salt mines."

"Then you've seen her. Where is she?"

"I have no intention of telling you. Maude is well and happy—happy for the first time in her life."

"You're going to tell me," he said between clenched teeth.

He grabbed her pipestem wrist. She batted her eyes in fearful defiance, her seamed lips shrinking back from her long teeth. I took him by the shoulder and the arm and jerked him back on his heels, breaking his grip.

"Take it easy, Harlan. You can't force information out of people."

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He gave me a look of dull hatred, then transferred it to his mother. She returned it.

"The same old Reginald," she said, "who used to love pinning beetles to a board. Who is this gentleman, by the way?"

"Mr. Archer." He added heavily: "A private detective."

She flung up her hands and grimaced. "Ah, Reggie. You're outdoing yourself. You haven't changed a bit."

"Neither have you, Mother. But you and I are not the point at issue. Please don't try to divert me. I want to know where Maude and her—her consort are."

"You won't find out from me. Aren't you satisfied with thirty years of Maude's life? Do you have to have it all?"

"I know what's best for Maude. I doubt that you do, after the frightful hash you've made of your own life." He looked with contempt at the peeling walls, the patched screen door, the discarded old woman who had taken refuge behind it. "If you're responsible for this brainstorm of hers—"

He ran out of words. Fury had strung him as taut as a wire. I could practically hear him hum. And I kept my shoulder between him and the door.

"It's no brainstorm," she said. "Maude found a man who suited her at last, and she had the good sense to forsake everything for him. Just as I did." Memory smoothed her face; a surge of romantic feeling sang like a warped record through her voice: "I'm proud of my part in this."

"You admit it, then?"

"Why shouldn't I? I brought her and Leonard Lister together last spring, when she was here with me. Leonard's a splendid man, and they took to each other at once. Maude needed a powerful male personality to break through to her, after all those spinster years—"

"What did you say his name was?"

"Leonard Lister," I said.

The old woman's hand had gone to her mouth. She said between yellow fingers: "I didn't mean to tell you. Now that you've got it out of me—you must have heard of Leonard. He's a brilliant creative artist in the theater."

"Have you ever heard of him, Archer?"

"No."

"Leonard Lister?" the old woman said. "Surely you know his name, if you live in Los Angeles. He's a well-known director in the experimental theater. He's even taught at the University. Leonard has wonderful plans for making poetic film, like Cocteau's in France."

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"No doubt his plans include Maude's money," Harlan said.

"You *would* think of such a thing. But it's not true. He loves her for herself."

"I see. I see. And you're the honest broker who procured your own daugher for a fortune hunter. How much is this brilliant fellow going to pay you for your services?"

The sunset had faded out. Deprived of its borrowed color, the old woman's face behind the screen was drawn and bloodless.

"You know it's not true, and you mustn't say such things. Maude has been kind to you. You owe her some tolerance. Why don't you give up gracefully and go home?"

"Because my sister has been misled. She's in the hands of fools and knaves. Which are you, Mother?"

"Neither. And Maude is better off than she's ever been in her life." But her assurance was failing under his one-track pressure.

"*This* I desire to see for myself. Where are they?"

"You shan't find out from me." She looked at me with an obscure appeal in her eyes.

"Then I'll find out for myself."

It wasn't hard to do. Leonard Lister was in the telephone book. He had an apartment address in Santa Monica, on one of the grid of streets above Lincoln Boulevard. I tried to talk Harlan, an obvious troublemaker, into letting me take it from here. But he was as hot as a cocker with bird scent in his nostrils. I had to let him come, or drop the case. And he'd probably make more trouble by himself.

It was almost dark when we found the place, an old two-story stucco house set back from the street behind a brown patch of lawn. Lister's apartment was a small studio built over an attached garage. A flight of concrete steps slanted up the outside wall of the garage. There were lights in the house, and behind the blinded windows of the apartment. Under the late twilight stillness our feet rustled in the dry grass.

"Imagine Maude being reduced to this," Harlan said. "A woman of exquisite refinement, come to live in a slum with a—a gigolo."

"Uh-huh. You better let me do the talking. You could get hurt, tossing that language around."

"No ruffian can intimidate me."

But he let me go ahead of him up the flight of steps. It was lit by an insect-repellent yellow bulb over the door at the top. I knocked at the door.

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There was no answer. I knocked again. Harlan reached past me and turned the knob. The door was locked.

"Pick the lock," he said in an urgent whisper. "They're in there lying low, I'm sure of it. You must have skeleton keys?"

"I also have a license to lose."

He hammered the door till it vibrated in its frame. His seal-ringed knuckle made little dents in the paint. Soft footsteps approached from the other side. I thrust Harlan back with my arm. He almost lost his balance on the narrow landing.

The door opened. "What goes on?"

The man in the doorway wore a striped cotton bathrobe, and nothing else. His shoulders and bare chest were Herculean, a little bowed and softened by his age. He was in his late forties, perhaps. His red hair was shaggy and streaked with gray. His thick mouth gleamed like a bivalve in the red nest of his beard. His eyes were deepset and dreamy, the kind of eyes that watch the past or the future but seldom look directly at the present.

Over the shoulders which nearly filled the doorframe, I could see into the lighted room. It was cramped and meanly furnished with a studio bed, a few chairs. Books spilled from homemade shelves constructed out of red bricks and unfinished boards. In the cubbyhole kitchenette on the far side a woman was working. I could see her dark head, her slim back with apron strings tied at the waist, and hear dishes rattling.

I told Lister who I was, but he was looking at the man behind me.

"Mr. Harlan, isn't it? This is quite a surprise. I can't say it's a pleasant one." His voice had the ease that great size gives a man. "Now what do you want, Mr. Harlan?"

"You know perfectly well. My sister."

Lister stepped out, closing the door behind him. It became very cozy with the three of us on the yard-square landing, like the components of fission coming together. Lister's bare feet were silent on the concrete. His voice was soft:

"Maude is busy. I'm pretty busy myself. I was just going to take a shower. So my advice to you is, go away. And don't bother coming back. We're going to be indefinitely busy."

"Busy spending her money?" Harlan said.

Lister's teeth flashed in his beard. His voice took on an edge.

"It's easy to see why Maude won't speak to you. Now take your detective friend and

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remove yourself from my doorstep."

"So the old hag got in touch with you? How much of a percentage are you paying her?"

Lister moved quickly around me. He took Harlan by the front of his coat, lifted him, shook him once, and set him back on his feet.

"Speak of your mother with some respect, you little schnook."

Harlan leaned on the railing, gripping it firmly like a child daring adults to dislodge him. His face in the yellow light looked sick with humiliation. He said in stubborn malice:

"I want to see my sister. I want to see what you've done to her, you bully."

I said: "Let's go," and laid a hand on his arm.

"Are you on his side, too?" He was almost crying.

"A man's home is his castle, after all. He doesn't like you, Reginald. Neither does she, apparently."

"You can say that again," Lister said. "The little leech has sucked her blood for too long. Now get out of here before you make me mad for real."

"Come on, Reginald. We're getting nowhere."

I detached him from the railing. Below and behind me, a man's voice was raised. "Trouble up there, Lister?" The voice sounded as if its owner hoped so.

He was a gray-haired man in a Hawaiian print shirt, standing spraddle-legged in the splash of light at the foot of the stairs. It colored his spongy face and made his eyes look colorless.

"No trouble, Dolph. These gentlemen are just leaving."

Lister stood with his back against the door, a seedy hero in a dirty bathrobe defending his two-bit castle, and watched us go down the stairs. The door closed sharply, and the yellow light went out. Harlan muttered under his breath.

The gray-headed man was waiting for us at the bottom. He whispered through an alcoholic haze:

"Cops?"

I didn't answer. He jerked at my coatsleeve, naggingly: "What's lover-man been up to now?"

"You wouldn't be interested."

"That's what you think. You got another think coming. He's got a woman with him, hasn't he?"

"None of your business."

I pulled my coatsleeve free. But he was hard to shake off. He thrust his pudgy face forward into mine.

"What Lister does is my business. I got a right to know

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if my tenants are living in sin."

I started to walk away from him and his breath. He followed me across the driveway, bracing his wavering stride with one outstretched hand against the closed garage door. His voice trailed huskily after me:

"What's the beef about? I got a right to know. I'm a respectable man, see. I don't run any callhouse for broken-down fourflushers."

"Wait a minute," Harlan said. "Are you Lister's landlord?"

"Sure thing, I never liked the s.o.b., it was the little woman that rented him the apartment. *She* thought he was class. I saw through him at a glance. Another movie has-been. A never-was."

He sagged against the stucco wall. Harlan leaned over him like a prosecutor, his face a leaden silhouette in the dim light from a blinded window.

"What else do you know about Lister, my man?"

"I'm going to throw him out on his ear if he don't watch himself."

"You mentioned his dealings with women. What about that?"

"I don't know what goes on up there. But I'm going to find out."

"Why don't you go up now? You have the right to, you know, you own the place."

"By God, I will."

I went back to Harlan and took his arm. "Let's get out of here, Reginald. You've made enough trouble for one night."

"I make trouble? Nonsense. My sister's married to a criminal."

The man against the wall wagged his gray head solemnly. "You couldn't be righter. Is the woman with him your sister?"

"Yes."

"And she's married to him?"

"I believe so. But I can't let her stay with him. I'm going to take her home—"

"Not tonight, Reginald." I tightened my grip on his arm. "I have to do something. I have to act."

He tried to break away from me. His hat fell off, and his meager hair fell down over his ears. He almost screeched:

"How dare you? Take your hands off me."

A woman's full-breasted shadow fell on the blind. Her voice issued sharply from the window:

"Jack! Are you still out there?"

The gray-headed man straightened up as if he'd been touched by live current. "Yeah. I'm here."

"Come inside. You're drunk, and you've been talking nonsense."

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"Who's going to make me?" He said it under his breath.

She heard him. "I said come in. You're making a laughing-stock of yourself. And tell your friends to go home."

He turned his back on us and walked uncertainly to the front door. Harlan tried to follow him. I held Harlan. The door slammed. A bolt clicked home.

"Now see what you've done," Harlan said, "with your mishandling and your interference! I was just about to learn something."

"You never will."

I released him and went to the car, not caring whether he came along or not. He caught up with me at the curb, wiping his hat with a handkerchief and breathing audibly.

"The least you can do for the money I paid you is drop me at my hotel. The cab fares are scandalous here."

"All right. Where is it?"

"The Oceano Hotel, in Santa Monica."

"This is Santa Monica."

"Really?" He added a moment later: "I'm not surprised. Something guided me to Santa Monica. Maude and I have had a sort of telepathic communication, going back virtually to infancy. Especially when she's in trouble."

"I wonder if she is in trouble."

"With that brute?" He laughed harshly. "Did you observe his conduct to me?"

"It seemed fairly normal under the circumstances."

"Normal for this godforsaken place, perhaps. But I'm not going to put up with it. And incidentally, if you intend to do nothing further, I expect a rebate of at least fifty per cent."

I wanted to ask him who had stolen his rattle when he was a baby. Instead I said: "You'll get paid in services. I'll spend tomorrow on Lister. If he's a wrong number, I'll find out. If he isn't—"

"It's clear that he is. You heard his landlord's remarks."

"The guy was drunk. And I wouldn't go around calling people names without some proof. You almost got your head knocked off."

"I don't care what happens to me. It's Maude I'm anxious about. I have only one sister."

"You have only one head."

He sulked the rest of the way. I let him out at the white curb without a word. In the neon kaleidescope of the ocean front, against the pink backdrop of the hotel, he looked like a displaced shadow from a dark dream. Not my dream, I congratulated myself.

Prematurely.

In the morning I called a

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friend in the District Attorney's office. Lister had a record: two drunken driving convictions, a battery complaint reduced to disorderly conduct, nothing worse. He had been a small-time producer before television. His last recorded place of employment was the University.

I made another telephone call, and paid a visit to the University. The spring semester had ended, and Summer School not yet begun, so the campus was bare of students. But most of the faculty were on the job. The acting head of the Speech Department, a man named Schilling, was in his office.

Schilling wasn't a typical professor. Under the flesh which covered his face with a middle-aging mask, he had the profile of a juvenile lead. He was dressed like an actor in a very sharp gabardine suit and an open-throated sports shirt. The wavy brown hair which undulated back from his widow's peak was very carefully arranged. I wondered if it was dyed.

"It's nice of you to give me your time, Doctor."

"Not at all. Sit down, Mr. Archer." He sat at his desk by the window, where the light could make the most of his features. "When I spoke to you on the telephone, you expressed an interest in one of the members—one of the ex-members of our faculty family." He enunciated his words with great distinctness, listening to the rich tones of his voice. They seemed to please him.

"Leonard Lister." I sat down in a straight chair at the end of the paper-strewn desk.

"Exactly what kind of information do you wish? And what use would you put it to? We have our little professional secrets, too, you know, even in this sheltered world of ours."

"I want to know if he's honest. That's the main thing. He seems to have married into a fairly wealthy family. They don't know much about him." Which was putting it mildly.

"And they've employed you to investigate him?"

"That's the idea. Certain members of the family think he may be crooked."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't say that."

"Why did you fire him?"

"We didn't fire him, exactly. Leonard didn't have tenure, he was only a Special Lecturer in the Department. And we simply failed to renew his contract at the end of the fall semester."

"You had a reason, though, and it wasn't incompetence?"

"Certainly not incompetence. Leonard knows the theater. He's been in it for twenty years, in New York and

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on the Continent as well as here. And he was quite a figure in the movies at one time. He made a mint while it lasted, and he had a country house and a yacht and even an actress wife, I believe. Then he lost it. This was years ago. I don't know all that happened to him in the interim, but he was glad to accept my offer of a teaching job."

"What did he teach?"

"We used him mostly for Extension work, directing plays for various groups and lecturing on the drama. He was well liked by his students."

"Then what was the matter with him?"

He hesitated. "I suppose I should say the matter was ethical. He's quite a fellow in his way—I've always liked him personally—but he simply didn't subscribe to the code of the teaching profession. Leonard spent some time in France, you know, in the old expatriate days, and a good deal of the Left Bank rubbed off on him. He drank too much, he liked women too much, he couldn't face up to the realities of his position. He's an enormous man—I don't know whether you know him—"

"I know him."

"—but he's not really very grownup. Out of touch, almost manic at times."

"Could you be more specific, Doctor?"

He looked away from me, out of the window, and ran his hand carefully over his hair. "I hate to blacken another man's reputation. And, after all, the name of the University is involved. It's a very delicate matter."

"I realize that. I'll keep it confidential. All this is simply for my own information."

"Well." He turned back to me. All he'd needed was a little coaxing. "Leonard had a habit of messing with his women students, with one of them in particular. Rumors got around, as they always do, and I cautioned Leonard. I gave him fair warning. He failed to profit by it, so I kept a close eye on him. This Department is precarious enough without a major scandal on top of everything else. Fortunately, I caught him personally, and kept it quiet."

Schilling was lighting up with a theatrical glow. Apparently he was reenacting his big moment. "Along towards the end of the fall semester, on an afternoon in December, I saw them go into his office together—it's just down the hall from mine. You should have seen the look on her face, the cowlike adoration. Well, I secured a master key from the maintenance department and

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after a suitable interval, I went in. There they were, *in flagrante*, if you understand me."

"Was she a young girl?"

"No. It could have been worse. As a matter of fact, she was a married woman. Quite a few of our students are young married women with—ah—theatrical ambitions. But even as it was, the situation was too bad to be allowed to continue. I put an end to it, and Leonard left us. I haven't seen him since."

"What happened to the woman?"

"She dropped out of her course. She showed no promise, anyway, and I for one was happy to see her go. You should have heard the names she called me that afternoon, when after all I was only doing my duty. I *told* Leonard he was playing with dynamite. Why, the woman was a hellcat." With the forefinger of his left hand, he traced his profile from hairline to chin, and smiled to himself. "I'm afraid that's all the information I have."

"One more thing. You said he was honest."

"Except in that little matter of women, yes."

"Honest in money matters?"

"So far as I know. Leonard never cared for money. He cares so little for it, in fact, that he's financially irresponsible. Well, now that he's married into wealth, I suppose he'll be settling down. I hope for his sake he can. And I very much hope I haven't said anything that will damage his standing with the family."

"Not if he's dropped the other woman. What was her name, by the way?"

"Dolphine. Stella Dolphine. Quite an unusual name." He spelled it for me.

I looked it up in Schilling's telephone directory. There was only one Dolphine listed: a Jack Dolphine who lived at the same address as Leonard Lister.

In full daylight the stucco house in Santa Monica had an abandoned look. The blinds were drawn on all the windows, upstairs and down. The dying lawn, the unkempt flowerbeds strangling in crab grass, seemed to reflect the lives of people bound and paralyzed by their unhappiness. I noticed, though, that the lawn had recently been hosed, and a few drying puddles lay on the uneven concrete of the driveway.

I climbed the outside stairs to Lister's apartment. Nobody answered my knock. I turned the knob. The door was locked. I went down and lifted the overhead door of the garage. It was empty.

I pressed the bellpush beside

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the front door and waited. Shuffling footsteps dragged through the house. The gray-haired man in the Hawaiian shirt opened the door and peered out into the sun. He had had a bad night. His eyes were blurred by alcohol and grief, his mouth was raw and defenseless. The slack flesh of his face hung like melting plasticine on the bones. So did his body. He was a soft-boiled egg without a shell.

He didn't seem to recognize me.

"Mr. Dolphine?"

"Yeah." He recognized my voice. "Say, what's the pitch? You were here last night; you said you were a cop."

"It was your idea. I'm a private cop. Name's Archer."

"Whatddaya know, I was a private cop myself—plant guard at Douglas. But I retired when my investments started to pay off. I own six houses and an apartment court. Maybe you wouldn't think it to look at me."

"Good for you. What happened to the tenants in your apartment?"

"Lister, you mean? You tell me. He moved out."

"For keeps?"

"Damn right for keeps." He floundered across the doorstep, preceded by his breath, and laid one hand on my shoulder, confidentially. It also helped to hold him up. "I was all set to give him his walking papers, only he saved me the trouble. Packed up his stuff, what there was of it, and left."

"And the woman went with him? His wife?"

"Yeah, she went along."

"In his car?"

"That's correct."

He gave me a description of the car, a blue Buick sedan, on its second or third hundred thousand. Dolphine didn't know the license number. The Listers had left no forwarding address.

"Could I speak to Mrs. Dolphine?"

"What you want with her?" His hand grew heavier on my shoulder. His eyes were narrow and empty between puffed lids.

"She might know where Lister went."

"You think so?"

"Yes." I shrugged, dislodging his hand. "I hear she's a friend of his."

"You do, eh?"

He fell against me, his upturned face transfigured by sudden rage, and reached for my throat. He was strong, but his reactions were clumsy. I knocked his hands up and away. He staggered back against the doorpost, his arms outstretched in the attitude of crucifixion.

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"That was a silly thing to do."

"I'm sorry." He was shuddering, as if he had given himself a terrible scare. "I'm not a well man. This excitement—" His hands came together, clutching at the hula girls on his chest. An asthmatic wheeze twanged like a loose guitar string in the back passages of his head. His face was blotched white.

"What excitement?"

"Stella's left me. She took me for all she could, then dropped me like a hotcake. I'll give you a piece of advice. Don't ever marry a younger woman—"

"When did this happen?"

"Last night. She took off with Lister."

"Both of the women went with him?"

"Yessir. Stella and the other one. Both of them." A drunken whimsy pulled his face lopsided. "I guess the big red bull thinks he can look after two. He's welcome. I've had enough."

"Did you see them leave?"

"Not me. I was in bed."

"How do you know your wife took off with Lister?"

"She told me she was gonna." He lifted the heavy burden of his shoulders, and dropped it. "What could I do?"

"You must have some idea where they went."

"Nah, I don't know and I don't want to. Let them go. She was no good to me anyway." The asthma wheezed behind his words, like an unspoken grief. "So I say let her go, it's a good riddance for me."

He sat down on the step and covered his face with his hands. His hair was wild and torn, like a handful of gray feathers. I left him.

I drove to the Oceano Hotel and called Harlan on the intramural telephone. He answered immediately, his voice high and nagging.

"Where on earth have you been? I've been trying to get you."

"Checking on Lister," I said. "He's decamped with your sister—"

"I know. He telephoned me. My worst forebodings were justified. It's money he wants, and he's coming here to try and collect."

"When?"

"At twelve noon. I'm to meet him in the lobby."

I looked at the electric clock on the wall of the desk clerk's alcove: 11:20.

"I'm in the lobby now. Shall I come up?"

"I'll come down." He hesitated. "I have a visitor."

I sat on a red plastic settee near the elevator door. The metal arrow above it turned

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from one to three and back to one. The door slid open. Harlan's mother emerged, tinkling and casting vague glances around the lobby. She wore a greenish black cape over her sackcloth dress, which made her look like an old bird of ill omen.

She saw me and came forward, taking long skinny-legged strides in her flat sandals.

"Hello, Mrs. Harlan."

"My name is not Harlan," she said severely. But she neglected to tell me what it was. "Are you following me, young man? I warn you—"

"You don't have to. I came to see your son. I guess you did, too."

"Yes, my son." A black mood clawed her face downward. From its furrows her eyes glittered like wet black stones. "You look like a decent man. I know something of spiritual auras. It's my study, my life work. And I'll tell you, Mr. Whatsis, since you're involved with Reginald, my son has an evil aura. He was a cold-hearted boy and he's grown into a cold-hearted man. He won't even help his own sister in her extremity."

"Extremity?"

"Yes, she's in very serious trouble. She wouldn't tell me what it was. But I know my daughter—"

"When did you see her?"

"I haven't seen her. She telephoned me last night, and she was desperate for money. Of course she knows I have none, I've been living off her bounty for ten years. She wanted me to intercede with Reginald. As I have done." Her mouth closed like a pouch with a drawstring.

"He won't open the family coffers?"

She shook her head, dislodging tears from the corners of her eyes. The arrow over the elevator door had turned to three and back again to one. Harlan stepped out. His mother gave him a sidelong glance and started away. She flapped across the lobby and out into the street, a bird of ill omen who had seen a more ominous bird.

Harlan came up to me with a tentative smile and an outstretched hand. His handshake was dead.

"I didn't mean to be unpleasant last night. We Harlans are rather emotional."

"Forget it, I'm not proud."

He glanced at the sunlit door through which his mother had vanished. "Has she been filling you with fantasies? I ought to warn you, she's not entirely sane."

"Uh-huh. She told me that Maude needs money."

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"Lister does, at any rate."

"How much money?"

"Five thousand dollars. He says he's bringing Maude's check for that amount. I'm to expedite payment by telephoning our bank in Chicago. It amounts to his asking *me* to cash the check."

"Did you talk to your sister at all?"

"No. It's one of the things that alarm me. Just *one* of them. He had a long involved explanation, to the effect that she's not well enough to leave the house, and there's no telephone where they're staying."

"He didn't say where that was?"

"Absolutely not. He was most evasive. I tell you he means her no good, if she's still alive—"

"Don't jump to conclusions. The most important thing is to find out where she is. So handle him carefully. Accept what he says."

"You don't mean I should cash the check?" He spoke with great feeling, five thousand dollars' worth of it.

"It's your sister's money, isn't it? Maybe she does need it. She told your mother she did."

"So Mother claims. But the old fool would lie for her. I suspect they're in cahoots."

"That I doubt."

Harlan paid no attention. "How could Maude need the money? She took a thousand dollars with her last week."

"Maybe they stopped off at Vegas."

"Nonsense. Maude detests the very idea of gambling. She's quite a frugal person, like myself. She couldn't spend a thousand dollars in a single week, unless the man is bleeding her."

"Sure she could, on her honeymoon. This whole thing may not be as bad as you think. I've made some inquiries, and Lister has a fair reputation." I decided that was stretching it, and added: "At least he isn't totally bad."

"Neither was Landru," Harlan said darkly.

"We'll see." It was ten to twelve by the electric clock. "Don't accuse him of anything. But tell him he'll have to come back for the cash. I'll wait outside and tail him when he comes out. You sit tight. I'll get in touch with you when I find out where they're holed up."

He nodded several times.

"And for God's sake, take it easy with him, Harlan. I don't believe that he's a commercial killer. But he could turn out to be a passional one."

Lister had the virtue of punctuality, at least. At one

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minute to twelve an old Buick sedan appeared from the direction of downtown Santa Monica. It pulled up at the curb a hundred feet short of the hotel entrance. Lister got out and locked his car. His beret and dark glasses gave him the look of a decadent Viking.

I was parked across the wide boulevard, facing in the wrong direction. As soon as Lister had entered the hotel, I U-turned and found a parking space a few cars behind the Buick. I got out for a closer look at it.

Its blue paint was faded and almost hidden by road grime. The fenders were crumpled. I peered through the dusty glass at the luggage on the back seat: a woman's airplane set with the monogram MH, a man's scuffed leather bag covered with European hotel labels and steamship stickers, a canvas haversack stuffed with oblong shapes which were probably books. A long object wrapped in brown paper leaned across the luggage. It had the shape of a spade.

I looked around. There were too many people on the street for me to do a windwing job.

Back in my own car I made a note of the license number and waited. The blue glare from the sea, relayed by the chrome of passing cars, bothered my eyes. I put on a pair of sunglasses. A few minutes later Lister appeared on the sidewalk, swaggering toward me. He had taken off his dark glasses, and his blue eyes seemed to be popping from white lids. He looked elated. I remembered what Schilling had said about his manic side, and wished I could see the lower part of his face, where danger often shows. Perhaps the beard had a purpose.

Lister got into the Buick and headed north. I trailed him through heavy noon traffic at a variable distance. He drove with artistic abandon, burning rubber at the Sunset stoplight. Six or eight miles north of it he turned off the highway, tires screeching again. I braked hard and took the turn onto gravel slowly.

The gravel road slanted steeply up a hillside. The Buick disappeared over the rim. I ate my way through its dust to the top and saw it a quarter mile ahead, going fast. The road wound down into a small closed valley where a few ranch houses stood in cultivated fields. A tractor clung like a slow orange beetle to the far hillside. The air between was so still that the Buick's dust hung like a colloid over the road. I ate another couple of miles of it, by way of lunch.

Beyond the third and last ranch house, a County sign

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announced: *This is not a through road.* A rusty mailbox sagged on a post beside it. I caught a glimpse of the faded stenciling on the mailbox. "Leonard Lister," I thought it said.

The Buick was far ahead by now, spinning into the defile between two bluffs at the inner end of the valley. It spun out of sight. The road got worse, became a single dirt track rutted and eroded by the rains of many springs. At its narrowest point an old landslide almost blocked it.

I was so taken up with the road that I almost passed the house before I noticed it. It stood far back, at the end of a eucalyptus-shadowed lane. I saw the Buick, standing empty, through the trees; and I kept on going. When I was out of sight of the house I turned my car and left it with the doors locked.

I climbed through yellow mustard and purple lupine to a point from which I could look down on the house. It was a ruin. Its cracked stucco walls leaned crazily. Part of the tile roof had caved in. I guessed that it had been abandoned when water undermined its foundations. Rank geraniums rioted in the front yard, and wild oats stood fender-high around the Buick.

In the back yard, close against the wall of the house, a broad-backed man was digging a hole. The bright iron of his spade flashed now and then in the sun. I moved down the slope toward him. The hole was about six feet long by two feet wide. Lister's head, when he paused to rest, cast a jut-jawed shadow at the foot of the stucco wall.

I sat down with the yellow mustard up to my eyes and watched him work. After a while he took his shirt off. His heavy white shoulders were peppered with reddish freckles. The metal of his spade was losing its brightness. In an hour the hole was approximately four feet deep. Lister's red hair was dark with sweat, and his arms were running with it. He stuck the spade into the pile of adobe he had dug, and went into the house.

I started down the hillside. A hen pheasant whirred up from under my feet. In the glazed stillness its wings made a noise like a jato takeoff. I watched the house but there was no response, no face at the broken windows. I stepped over the sagging wire fence and crossed the back yard.

The door hung open on what had been a back kitchen. Its floor was littered with broken plaster which crunched under

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my feet. Through the bare ribs of the ceiling daylight gleamed. The silence was finely stitched with a tiny tumult of insects. I thought I could hear the murmur of voices somewhere; then the sound of heavy footsteps moved toward me through the house. I had my revolver ready. Lister came through the inner doorway, carrying a burlap bundle upright in his arms. His head was craned awkwardly sideways, watching his feet, and he failed to see me until I spoke.

"Hold it, gravedigger."

His head came up, eyes wide and blue in the red sweat-streaked face. His reaction was incredibly quick and strong. Without losing a step he came forward, thrusting his bundle out at arm's length into my face. I fired as I went down backward with the burlap thing on top of me. I pushed it off. It was heavy and stiff, like refrigerated meat. One of Lister's heels stamped down on my gun hand, the other came into my face. The daylight in the ceiling glimmered redly and died.

When my eyes blinked open, sunlight stabbed into them from the open door. One of my arms was numb, pinned under the thing in the burlap shroud. I disengaged myself from its embrace and sat up against the wall. The rumor of insects sounded in my head like small-arms fire between the heavy artillery of my pulse. I sat poised for a while between consciousness and unconsciousness. Then my vision cleared. I dabbed at my swollen face with my usable hand.

My revolver lay on the floor. I picked it up and spun the cylinder: its chambers had been emptied. Still sitting, I dragged the burlap bundle toward me and untied the twine that held its wrapping in place. Peeling the burlap down with a shaky hand, I saw a lock of black wavy hair stiff with blood.

I got up and unwrapped the body completely. It was the body of a woman who had been beautiful. Its beauty was marred by a depressed contusion which cut slantwise like a groove across the left temple. Bending close, I could also see a pair of purplish ovals on the front of the throat. Thumbprints.

Her skin shone like ivory in the light from the doorway. I covered her with the burlap. Then I noticed that my wallet was lying on the floor. Nothing seemed to be missing from it, but the photostat of my license was halfway out of its holder.

I went through the house. It was a strange place for a honeymoon, even for a honey-

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moon that ended in murder. There were no lights, and no furniture, with the exception of some patio furniture—canvas chairs and a redwood chaise with a ruptured pad—in what had been the living room. This room had a fairly weatherproof ceiling, and was clearly the one that Lister and his wife had occupied. There were traces of a recent fire in the fireplace: burned fragments of eucalyptus bark and a few scraps of scorched cloth. The ashes were not quite cold.

I crossed the room to the wooden chaise, noticing the marks of a woman's heels in the dust on the floor. In the dust beside the chaise someone had written three words in long sloping script: *Ora pro nobis.* The meaning of the phrase came back to me across twenty years or more. *Ora pro nobis.* Pray for us. Now and in the hour of our death. . .

For a minute I felt as insubstantial as a ghost. The dead woman and the living words were realer than I was. The actual world was a house with its roof falling in, dissolved so thin you could see the sunlight through it.

When I heard the car noise outside, I didn't believe my ears. I went to the front door, which stood open. A new tan Studebaker was toiling up the overgrown lane under the eucalyptus trees. It stopped where the Buick had been, and Harlan got out.

I stood back behind the door and watched him through the crack. He approached cautiously, his black glance shifting from one side to the other. When his foot was on the lintel, I showed myself and the empty gun in my hand. He froze in midstride, with a rigor that matched the dead woman's.

"For heaven's sake, put that gun down. You gave me a dreadful start."

"Before I put it down, I want to know how you got here. Have you been talking to Lister?"

"I saw him at noon, you know that. He told me about this place he used to own. I didn't get out on the street in time to intercept you. Now put the gun away, there's a good fellow. What on earth happened to your face?"

"That can wait. I don't understand yet why you're here."

"Wasn't that the plan, that I should join you here? I rented a car and got here as soon as I could. It took me a long time to find this place. And no wonder. Are they inside?"

"One of them is."

"My sister?" His hand

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grasped my arm. The long white fingers were stronger than they looked, and hard to shake off.

"You tell me."

I took him through the house to the back kitchen. Pulling back the burlap that covered the damaged head, I watched Harlan's face. It didn't change. Not a muscle moved. Either Harlan was as cold as the cadaver, or deliberately suppressing his emotion.

"I've never seen this woman before."

"She's not your sister? Take a good long look." I uncovered the body.

Harlan averted his eyes, his cheeks flushing purple. But his look came creeping sideways back to the body.

"This is your sister, isn't it, Mr. Harlan?"

I had to repeat the question to make him hear. He shook his head. "I never saw her before."

"I don't believe you."

"You don't seriously think I'd refuse to identify my own flesh and blood?"

"If there was money in it."

He didn't hear me. He was fascinated by the uncovered body. I replaced the burlap and told him what had happened, cutting it short when I saw he wasn't interested.

I took him to the front room and showed him the writing in the dust.

"Is that your sister's handwriting?"

"I couldn't possibly tell."

"Look closely."

Harlan squatted, leaning one arm on the chaise. "It's not her writing."

"Did she know Latin?"

"Of course. She taught it. I'm surprised that you do."

"I don't, but my mother was Catholic."

"I see." Rising awkwardly, he stumbled forward on one knee, obliterating the writing.

"Damn you, Harlan!" I said. "You're acting as if you murdered her yourself."

"Don't be absurd." He smiled his thin white-edged smile. "You're morally certain that's Maude in the back room, aren't you?"

"I'm morally certain you were lying. You were too careful not to recognize her."

"Well." He dusted his knee with his hands. "I suppose I had better tell you the truth, since you know it anyway. You're perfectly right, it's my sister. She wasn't murdered, however."

The sense of unreality returned to the room. I sat down on the chaise, which complained like an animal under my weight.

"It's a tragic story," Harlan said slowly. "I was rather hoping not to have to tell it.

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Maude died last night by accident. After I left the studio, she quarreled with Lister over his refusal to admit me. She became quite irrational, in fact. Lister tried to quiet her, but she got away from him and flung herself bodily down those outside steps. The fall killed her."

"Is that Lister's version?"

"It's the simple truth. He came to my hotel room a short while ago and told me what had happened. The man was in terrible earnest. I know genuine anguish when I see it and I can tell when a man is telling the truth."

"You're better than I am, then. I think he's playing you for a sucker."

"What?"

"I caught him practically red-handed, trying to bury the body. Now he's lying out of it the best way he can. It strikes me as very peculiar that you swallowed it."

Harlan's black eyes probed my face. "I assure you his story is the truth. He told me about everything, you see, including the matter of burial. Put yourself in his place. When Maude killed herself—was killed—last night, Lister saw immediately that suspicion would fall on him, especially my suspicion. He's had some trouble with the police, he told me. Inevitably in his panic he acted like a guilty man. He thought of this deserted place and brought the body here to dispose of it. His action was rash and even illegal, but I think understandable under the circumstances."

"You're very tolerant all of a sudden. What about the five grand he's been trying to con you for?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Has the check for five thousand slipped your mind?"

"We'll forget about it," he said impassively. "It's my affair, strictly between him and me."

I was beginning to get hold of the situation, if not the motives behind it. Somehow or other Lister had persuaded Harlan to cover for him. I said with all the irony I could muster: "So we'll bury the body and forget about it."

"Precisely my idea. Not we, however. You. I can't afford to become involved in any illegality whatsoever."

"What makes you think I can?"

He brought a leatherette folder out of his coat pocket and opened it to show me the Traveler's Checks inside. There were ten hundreds. "One thousand dollars," he said, "seems to me an adequate sexton's fee. Enough to assure forgetfulness as well."

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His look was very knowing, but his passion for money was making him idiotic. He was like a tone-deaf man who couldn't believe that other people heard music and even liked it. But I didn't argue. I let him sign the checks and listened to his instructions. Bury her and forget her.

"I sincerely hate to do this to Maude," he said before he left. "It goes against my grain to leave my sister in an unmarked grave, but I have to consider the greatest good of the greatest number. It would ruin the School if this matter got into the newspapers I can't let mere fraternal piety interfere with the welfare of the School."

Naturally I didn't bury the body. I left it where it lay and followed Harlan back to Santa Monica I caught the Studebaker before it reached the city, but I let it stay ahead of me.

He parked on Wilshire Boulevard and went into an air travel agency. Before I could find a parking space, he was out again and climbing into his car. I made a note of the agency's name and followed the Studebaker back to the Oceano Hotel. Harlan left it at the white curb for the garageman. There were shells in my dashboard compartment, and I reloaded my revolver.

The lobby of the hotel was deserted except for the desk clerk and a pair of old ladies playing canasta. I found a telephone booth at the rear and called the travel agency. A carefully preserved British accent said:

"Sanders' Travel Agency, Mr. Sanders speaking."

"This is J. Reginald Harlan," I said fussily. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"Indeed it does, Mr. Harlan. I trust your reservations are satisfactory?"

"I'm not entirely sure about that. You see, I'm eager to get there as soon as I can."

"I absolutely assure you, Mr. Harlan, I've put you on the earliest available flight. Ten o'clock from International Airport." A trace of impatience threaded through the genteel tones.

"When do I get there?"

"I thought I'd made that clear. It's written on your envelope."

"I seem to have misplaced the envelope."

"You're scheduled to arrive tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, Chicago time."

"Thank you."

"Not at all."

I called the hotel switchboard and asked for Harlan.

"Who is speaking, please?" the operator yodeled.

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"Lister. Leonard Lister."

"One moment, Mr. Lister, I'll ring Mr. Harlan's room. He's expecting you."

"Don't bother. I'll just go up. What was the number again?"

"Three fourteen, sir."

I took the elevator to the third floor. The elevator boy noticed my face, opened his mouth to comment, caught my eye, and shut his mouth without speaking. Harlan's room was at the front of the hotel, in a good location. I knocked.

"Is that you, Leonard?"

"Uh-huh."

Harlan opened the door and I crowded through. He raised his fists together in front of his chest, like a woman. Looking at me as if he hated me, he said "Come in, Mr. Archer."

"I'm in."

"Sit down then. I'm afraid I wasn't expecting to see you again. So soon," he added. "There hasn't been any trouble?"

"No trouble. Just the same routine murder."

"But it was an accident—"

"Maybe the fall downstairs was an accident. I don't think that fall killed her. There are thumbprints on her throat."

"But this is all news to me. Do sit down, Mr. Archer, won't you?"

"I'll stand. In the second place, your sister wrote a prayer in the dust in that house. She was alive when Lister took her there. In the third place, you just bought tickets to Chicago, and you're expecting another visit from Lister. Aren't you getting pretty cozy with him?"

"He's my brother-in-law, after all." His voice was bland.

"And you're very fond of him, eh?"

"Leonard has his points."

He sat down in an armchair by the window. Past his narrow cormorant skull I could see the sky and the sea, wide and candid, flecked with the white purity of sails. I spent too much of my time trying to question liars in rented rooms.

"I think he's your partner in crime. You both stand to gain by your sister's death. From what I've seen of the two of you, you're capable of murdering for gain."

"You've changed your mind about Lister, eh?"

"Not as much as you have."

Harlan made his hands flop in the air. "My dear good fellow, you couldn't possibly be further wrong. Even apart from the money I've paid you, I do earnestly hope for your sake that you won't act on your ridiculous theory. In the first place," he mimicked me, "if I were in league with Lister, I

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wouldn't have sought your help yesterday, would I?"

"You must have had a reason. I don't see it, though."

"I came to you in all sincerity. But now I know more about the situation. I tell you in all sincerity that if Lister had killed my sister I'd hunt him down to the ends of the earth. You don't know me."

"What about the plane tickets?"

"You've made a mistake. I bought no tickets, and if I had it's no concern of yours. Look here." He showed me the return half of a round-trip ticket between Los Angeles and Chicago. "You see, I'm flying home to Chicago tomorrow, by myself."

"Mission accomplished?"

"Deuce take you!" They were the strongest words I'd heard him use. He rose and came toward me. "Get out of my room now. I'm sick of the sight of you."

"I'm staying."

"I'll call the house detective."

"Hell, call the police."

He went to the room telephone and lifted the receiver. I stood and watched his bluff fade into nothing. He put the receiver down. I sat in the armchair he had vacated and he went into the bathroom. I heard him in there retching. He had meant it literally when he said I made him sick.

The phone rang after a while, and I answered it. A woman's voice said: "Reggie? I'm calling from a drug store. May we come to your room? Leonard thinks it would be safer."

"Naturally," I said in a higher voice than my own.

"Did you get the tickets?"

"Absolutely."

The bathroom door had opened. Harlan flung himself on my back. I hung up carefully before I turned on him. He fought with his nails and his teeth. I had to quiet him the hard way, with my left fist. I dragged him into the bathroom and shut the door on him.

Then I sat on the bed and looked at the telephone. Lister had a woman with him, and she knew Harlan. She knew Harlan well enough to call him Reggie, and Reggie had bought plane tickets for her and Lister. With a wrench that shook me down to my heels, the entire case turned over in my head and lodged at a crazy angle. Over its tilted edge I saw Dolphine's moon-dead face, and the faceless face of the woman who had left him.

I found his name again in the directory. His telephone rang six times, and then his voice came dimly over the wires:

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"Jack Dolphine speaking."

I said bluntly, to keep him from hanging up: "Mrs. Dolphine has left you, I understand."

"What's that? Who is this?"

"The private cop you talked to this morning, about the Lister case. It's turned into a murder case."

"Murder? How does Stella come into it?"

"That's the question, Mr. Dolphine. Is she there?"

There was a long silence, ending in a "No" that was almost as soft as silence.

"When did she leave?"

"I told you. Last night. Anyway she was gone when I got up this morning." Self-pity or some other emotion rose audibly in his throat. "This murder, you don't mean Stella?" The emotion choked him.

"Pull yourself together. Did your wife really leave with Lister?"

"Far as I know. Did he kill her? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"I'm not trying to tell you anything. I have a corpse on my hands. You should be able to identify it."

"You put the arm on Lister?" He sounded very eager.

"Not yet. I'm going to shortly."

"Don't let him go, whatever you do. He's a dangerous man. He killed her, I know he killed her."

He was choking up again. I said sharply: "How do you know?"

"He threatened to. I heard them talking before he went east, a couple of weeks ago. They were quarreling back and forth in his studio, yelling at each other like wild animals. She wanted to marry him, divorce me and go off with him. He said he was going to marry another woman, a woman he really loved. She said she wouldn't let him. And he told her if she interfered he'd strangle her with his hands."

"Will you swear to that?"

"I'll swear to it. It's the truth." His voice dropped. "*Did* he strangle her?"

"A woman's dead. I don't know who she is, until I get her identified. I'm in Santa Monica, at the Oceano Hotel. Can you come here now?"

"I guess so. I know where it is. Is *Stella* there?"

There was a flurry of footsteps in the hall.

"Maybe she soon will be Make it as quick as you can, and come right up. I'm in room three fourteen."

Somebody knocked on the hall door. I hung up, took my revolver out, and carried it to the door, which I swung wide

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Lister was surprised to see me. His eyes bulged in their white rings. His right hand started a movement, which the woman beside him interrupted. She wrapped both arms around his arm, and hung her weight on him:

"Please, Leonard, no more violence. I couldn't bear any more violence."

But there had been violence, and she had borne it. Its marks were on her face. One of her eyes had been blackened, one cheek was ridged diagonally with deep scratches. Otherwise she was a handsome woman of thirty or so, tall and slender-hipped in a tailored suit. A new-looking hat sat smartly on her dark head. But her single usable eye was glaring in desperation:

"Are you a policeman?"

Lister's free hand covered her mouth. "Be quiet now. Don't say a word. I'll do the talking."

They stumbled into the room in a kind of lockstep. I shut the door with my heel. The woman sat on the bed. The marks on her face were vivid against her pallor. Lister stood in front of her.

"Where's Harlan?"

"I'll ask the questions. You'll answer them."

"Who do you think you are?"

He took a threatening step. I leveled my revolver at his stomach.

"The one with the gun. It's loaded. I'll use it if I have to."

The woman spoke behind him. "Listen to me, Leonard. It isn't any use. Violence only breeds further violence. Haven't you learned that yet?"

"Don't worry, there won't be any trouble. I know how to deal with these Hollywood dollar-chasers." He turned to me, a white sneer flashing in his beard. "It *is* money you're after, isn't it?"

"That's what Harlan thought. He paid me a thousand dollars to bury a dead woman and forget her. I'm turning his checks over to the police."

"I hear you telling me."

"You'll see me do it, Lister. I'm turning you over to them at the same time."

"Unless I pay you, eh? How much?"

The woman sighed. "Dearest These shifts and stratagems can't you see how squalid, how squalid and miserable they are? We've tried your way and it's failed, wretchedly. It's time to try my way."

"We can't, Maude. And we haven't failed." He sat on the bed and put one arm around her narrow shoulders. "Just let me talk to him, I've dealt with his kind before. He's only a

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private detective. Your brother hired him yesterday."

"Where is my brother now?" she asked me. "Is he all right?"

"In there. He's a little battered."

I indicated the bathroom door with my gun. For some reason it was embarrassing to hold a naked weapon in front of her. I pushed it down into my waistband, leaving my jacket open in case I needed it quickly.

"You're Maude Harlan."

"I was. I am Mrs. Leonard Lister. This is my husband." She looked up into my face. I caught a glimpse of the thing between them. It flared like sudden lightning in blue darkness.

"The dead one is Stella Dolphine."

"Is that her first name? It's strange to have killed a woman without even knowing her name."

"No." The word was torn painfully from Lister's throat. "My wife doesn't know what she's saying, she's had a bad time."

"It's over now, Leonard. I'm afraid I'm not very adequate in the role of criminal." She gave him a bright smile, distorted by her wounds, and gave me the sad vestige of it. "Leonard wasn't there. He was taking a shower when the woman when Mrs. Dolphine came to our door. I killed her."

"Why?"

"It was my fault," Lister said, "all of it, from the beginning. I had no right to marry Maude, to drag her down into the life I live. I was crazy to bring her back to that apartment."

"Why did you?"

His white-ringed eyes rolled around, straining for a look at himself. "I don't know, really. Stella thought she owned me. I had to prove that she didn't." His eyes steadied. "I'm a disastrous fool."

"Be still." Her fingers touched his hairy mouth. The back of her hand was scratched. "It was an ill fate I scarcely know how it happened. It simply happened. She asked me who I was and I told her I was Leonard's wife. She said that *she* was his wife in the eyes of heaven. She tried to force her way into the apartment. I asked her to leave. She told me that I was the one who ought to leave, that I should go home with my brother.

"When I refused, she attacked me. She pulled me by the hair onto the outside landing I must have pushed her away somehow. She fell backwards down the steps, all the way to the bottom I heard her skull strike the concrete." Her

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small hand went to her own mouth, as if to hold it still "I think I fainted then."

"Yes," Lister said "Maude was unconscious on the landing when I came out of the shower. I carried her inside. It took me some time to bring her to and find out what had happened. I put her to bed and went down to see to Stella. She was dead, at the foot of the steps. Dead." His voice cracked.

"You were in love with her, Leonard," his wife said

"Not after I met you "

"She was beautiful " There was a questioning sadness in her voice.

"She isn't any more," I said. "She's dead, and you've been carrying her body around the countryside What sense was there in that?"

"No sense." Behind his hairy mask, Lister had the shame-faced look of a delinquent boy. "I panicked. Maude wanted to call the police right away. But I've had one or two little scrapes with them in the past. And I knew what Dolphine would do if he found Stella dead at my door. He hates me " The naive blue eyes were bewildered by the beginnings of insight. "I don't blame him."

"What would he do?"

"Cry murder, and pin it on me "

"I don't see how. The way your wife described it, it's a clear case of manslaughter, probably justifiable."

"Is it? I wouldn't know. I felt so guilty about Stella, I wasn't thinking too well I simply wanted to hide her and get Maude out of the country, away from the mess I'd made "

"That's what the five thousand was for?"

"Yes."

"You were going by way of Chicago?"

"The plan was changed. Maude's brother advised me to take her back to Chicago instead After you tracked us down, I came here to him and made a clean breast of everything He said leaving the country was an admission of guilt, in case the matter ever came to trial "

"It will "

'Does it really need to?" He leaned toward me, the bed squealing under his shifting weight. "If you have any humanity, you'll let us go to Chicago. My wife is a gentlewoman. I don't know if that means anything to you "

"Does it to you?"

He dropped his eyes "Yes. She can't go through a Los Angeles trial, with the dirt they'll dig up about me and throw in her face."

I said: "I have some humanity, not enough to go

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round. Right now Stella Dol phine is using most of it."

"You said yourself it was justifiable manslaughter."

"The way your wife tells it, it is."

"Don't you believe me?" She sounded astonished.

"As far as your story goes, I believe you. But you don't know all the facts. There are thumbprints on Stella Dolphine's throat I've seen prints like them on the throats of other women who were stran gled."

"No," she whispered. "I swear it. I only pushed her."

I looked at the delicate hands that were twisting in her lap "You couldn't have made those marks. You pushed her down the stairs and knocked her out and set her up for somebody else. Somebody else found her unconscious and throttled her. Lister?"

His head sank like an exhausted bull's. He didn't look at his wife.

"Stella Dolphine made trouble for you, and she was in a position to make more trouble You decided to put an end to it by finishing her off. Is that the way it happened?"

"The sinister habit," he said "The sinister habit of asking questions, as Cocteau calls it. You've got a bad case of it, Archer."

"Liars bring it out in me."

"All right," he said to the floor. "If I admit it, and take the blame, will you let Maude go free, back to Chicago with her brother?"

She pressed her face against his bowed shoulder and said "No. You didn't do it, Leonard. You're only trying to protect me."

"Did *you?*"

She shook her head slowly against his body. He turned and held her. I looked past them out the window to the darkening sea. They were fairly decent people, as people go, harried by the future and the past but holding together on the sharp ridge of the instant And I was tormenting them The case turned over behind my eyes again, a many-headed monster struggling to be born out of my mind.

Harlan opened the bathroom door and came out shakily. His nose was bleeding He looked at me with hatred, at the lovers with desolation. Unnoticed by them, he stood like a wallflower against the doorframe

"I should never have come here," he said bitterly.

I turned to them. "This has gone far enough."

They were blind and deaf, alone together on the sharp ridge, held flesh to flesh. A door creaked. I thought it was

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Harlan closing the bathroom door, and I looked in the wrong direction. Dolphine was in the room before I saw him. A heavy service revolver wavered in his hand. He advanced on Lister and his wife.

"You killed her, you devils."

Lister tried to get up from the bed. The woman held him. Her back was to the gun.

The gun spoke once, very loudly, its echoes rumbling like delayed thunder. Harlan had crossed to the center of the room, perhaps with some idea of defending his sister. He took the slug in the body. It stopped him like a wall He fell I fired across him.

Dolphine dropped his revolver. He spread his hands across his stomach and backed against the wall, where he sat down He was wheezing. Water ran from his eyes and nose. His face worked, trying to realize his grief and failing Blood began to run between his fingers. I stood over him.

"How do you know they killed her?"

"I saw them I saw it all "

"You were in bed."

"No, I was in the garage. They threw her down the steps and came down after and choked her. Lister did. I saw him."

"You didn't call the police "

"No, I—" His mouth groped for words. "I'm a sick man. I was too sick to call them. Upset. I couldn't talk."

"You're sicker now, but you're going to have to talk It wasn't Lister, was it? It was you."

He choked, and began to cough blood Great pumping sobs forced red words out of his mouth.

"She got what she deserved. I thought when I told her he'd married the other one that she would come back to my bed But she wouldn't look at me All she could think about was getting him back. When I was the one that loved her."

"I can see that."

"I did I loved her."

He lifted his red-laced hands in front of his eyes and began to scream. He rolled sideways with his face to the wall, screaming

He died that night

Harlan was dead already. He should never have come there

"O"

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a *NEW* short-short by

H. R. F. KEATING

Breathes there man, woman, or child who does not dread a visit to the dentist? Well, Mr Keating now makes it possible for you to keep the appointment and feel no pain. But to Mrs. Maltravers it was an altogether different story

TORTURE CHAMBER

by H R F KEATING

Mrs. Maltravers was scared of the dentist. Which was why she had taken to going long ago not to a man but to Miss Potter She knew that most men dentists would be as considerate as Miss Potter, and at times she even told herself that a young man—Miss Potter was a battered 50—would probably be more efficient. However, the thought of being in the hands of a woman always made the prospect of her semiannual checkup a little more tolerable

So it was with fear well under control that one June day at precisely noon she rang the doorbell on the familiar street where Miss Potter's office was—a street familiar indeed since 20 years before she had actually lived in it for almost five years, in a poky flat in the very next house. That was why, she supposed, she had gone to Miss Potter in the first place after Mrs. Maltravers had married and given up her job in the West End and the dentist nearby whom she had gone to then. And that must have been 15 years ago, she thought.

To her surprise it was Miss Potter herself who came down the stairs and opened the door, white-jacketed and flint-faced

"Receptionist not in today," she explained in her customary brusque way. "But there's unlikely to be anything to do on you. Manage perfectly well on my own "

Trying not to feel too much relief at the optimistic forecast in case it proved wrong, Mrs Maltravers followed Miss Potter

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up the narrow rubber-treaded stairs In the claustrophobic office Miss Potter settled her into the chair and fastened a clean bib on its little chain around her neck

"Yes," she said, beginning to issue her usual stinted ration of preliminary conversation, "she was Irish, you know."

"She?" asked Mrs. Maltravers, while she was still able to contribute to the conversation

"Receptionist," Miss Potter explained, switching on the strong daylight lamp above the chair. "Irish not exactly reliable Didn't know she was when I took her on, or I wouldn't have "

Mrs. Maltravers, the former Miss O'Halloran, might at this point have suggested that it was a mistake to condemn everybody of any particular nationality. But Miss Potter abruptly presented her little inspection mirror to her lips and all she could do was to open wide

"Yes," Miss Potter went on, moving the mirror systematically inside Mrs. Maltravers' lower jaw, "she'd been married, you see Married to a perfectly good Englishman and left a widow. Shouldn't wonder if she didn't drive him to an early grave."

Mrs. Maltravers felt, despite the mirror in her mouth, that she must produce some sort of laugh at this, for all that Miss Potter had voiced the condemnation grimly enough. A curious strangled sound resulted, but she hoped it would be recognized for merriment.

Miss Potter pulled the big daylight lamp closer, then took a probe and attacked some particle lodged between two molars.

"She didn't have any accent, of course," she went on, somewhat more talkative today than usual "Took pains to conceal it no doubt."

Probe and mirror were momentarily withdrawn. Mrs. Maltravers might have tried at this point to change the subject. But the lamp had been brought so close that its light hurt her eyes. So she closed them and pretended simply to be nerving herself for the next stage of the examination.

"Open your eyes," Miss Potter said.

Mrs Maltravers did as she was told. She would have protested at the extraordinary abruptness of the command, but the mirror and the probe went in again.

She lay as relaxed as she could force herself to be and hoped that it would not be much longer. At least she always got a short rest between the examination of the lower jaw and the similar inspection

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of the top. But today things were, it seemed, to be different.

"Yes," Miss Potter said with sharp abruptness. "I'll do a little work on this one."

What work? How little? Mrs. Maltravers stiffened from head to foot

Briskly Miss Potter placed the hooked end of the draining tube into the corner of her mouth. She dragged the long metal-covered pipe right across and positively jabbed the hook in.

Was there going to be no short period of preparation? That blessed moment when, customarily, Miss Potter assured her that "This will only take a minute or two?"

There was not. "Open up," Miss Potter barked. And again the mirror plunged in.

And what about inquiring if she would like an injection?

"Yes," Miss Potter said, in a more reflective tone, apparently picking up the social chat from where she had left it. "Yes, you know my husband's left me?"

Mrs. Maltravers had no idea that Miss Potter was that then merely her professional name?—had even had a husband. Her face must have shown her surprise because Miss Potter answered as if she had actually been able to put the question.

"Oh, yes, I've been married nearly twenty-five years. My husband practices, too up near Harley Street, among the posh doctors."

It sounded as though the pent up jealousy of decades was being vented. Miss Potter removed the mirror and turned to the drill dangling menacingly behind her.

This would be the moment to ask for an injection, Mrs. Maltravers thought. But with the drain still in her mouth and its gurgling tube across her arms it would not be exactly easy either to speak or to remove it and then put her request. Could she flick the nasty thing out with her tongue?

Miss Potter snapped on the switch for the drill and as soon as Mrs. Maltravers heard its sound she realized, with a paralyzing feeling of dismay, that it was not the high-speed machine but the old-fashioned, implacably painful one, the one normally used only to gouge out a particularly deep cavity when its effect had been mercifully numbed by a stiff shot of Novocaine

The whirring drill head approached. Above its vicious zooming Miss Potter spoke again.

"But I wouldn't have expected you ever to think whether I had a husband or not," she said. "You're the sort that only cares about their dentist

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when they begin to hurt."

With the shaft of the inspection mirror she levered Mrs. Maltravers' mouth open to its very widest. Then she paused, with the heavy drill inside her mouth but not yet touching a tooth.

"Yes," she said, "I'm really Mrs Patrick O'Mahoney-Regan. You couldn't get much more Irish than that, could you? It's what I call ironic. Painfully ironic."

And she brought the drill head down on the tooth she had marked out. Above its dinning whirr Mrs. Maltravers could still hear her voice, shriller by far than usual.

"He ran off with that Irish slut of a receptionist of mine Not content with innumerable infidelities with his own receptionists, he had to have mine. That's what I call really Irish."

And then, just as the drill had begun to get near a nerve, she withdrew it. But she kept the ominously whirring drill head within an inch or two of Mrs. Maltravers' open mouth.

"Do you know," she asked abruptly, "that I've had this surgery here for more than twenty years?"

Mrs. Maltravers shook her head to indicate that she had not known She made the gesture with care.

"No, of course you don't," Miss Potter replied. "Otherwise you'd have realized that I know your secret."

Mrs. Maltravers raised one eyebrow interrogatively. She hoped what she had done did not look rude. Minute by minute the conviction was growing in her that she must not on any account antagonize Miss Potter just now.

"Yes, your secret," Miss Potter went on loudly. "I talk to my neighbors here sometimes, you know. So I'm well aware of the fact that you used to live in the flat next door before you were married. When you were known as Miss Bridget O'Halloran, you Irish spy!"

Then the drill descended. Pain seemed to jab to the very center of Mrs. Maltravers' head.

The woman's mad, she thought at last. She's been driven mad. Why, I don't believe there was anything at all wrong with my tooth.

Mercifully the extra twist of agony that this realization produced lasted only a second. It was brought to a halt by the sharp ringing of the telephone on the desk in the far corner of the office. Instinctively at the sound Miss Potter had withdrawn the instrument of torture.

When she goes across to answer, Mrs. Maltravers thought with a sudden fierce determination, I shall escape I shall fling

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aside this tube across me and run out.

But without leaving the chair Miss Potter swung back toward her. "Let it ring," she said. "It'll only be a patient, and there's nothing I hate more than patients."

She brought the drill toward Mrs. Maltravers once more. But with the fearsome instrument out of her mouth Mrs Maltravers could now speak, if only distortedly And with her brain working at a speed she would never have believed possible, she had thought of something to say.

"Them," she spat out, past the hooked tube of the drain "*Them*"

And it seemed that the incoherent syllable had penetrated

"Them?" Miss Potter said. "You mean that pretty Irish pair? You think so? Ringing to taunt me? You may well be right"

And then she did turn away. She turned and strode toward the desk and the still insistently ringing telephone In an instant Mrs. Maltravers had thrown off the gurgling coil that had lain across her arms. She swung her legs to the ground and heaved herself up.

But the neat white bib on its metal chain, which Miss Potter had hooked over a projection on the back of the chair, cut imperiously into her throat Tears came into her eyes Frustration filled her mind She lunged upward again, close to strangling herself on the tough cloth of the white bib.

And then the chain behind her broke

The suddenness of her release sent her staggering across the little office until she was within a foot of the white-jacketed figure of Miss Potter, shouting furiously into the telephone But at the last moment Mrs Maltravers managed to gain control She swung round and reached the door in three long paces She pulled it open and plunged down the rubber-covered stairs. The bib, its loose end caught somewhere in her collar, flew wildly behind her as she emerged into the peaceful summer street

But she felt no safety there. She turned and ran, ran anywhere, her mind a mass of confusions She had no idea whether Miss Potter was pursuing her or not She scarcely even knew who she herself was or where she had come from. All she knew was that she must run, she must escape

And then at last, her mind still in turmoil, she came upon a taxi. A fare had just left and the vehicle was standing, its engine idly throbbing Some memory

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of what such a vehicle was used for entered Mrs Maltravers' head. She flung herself into the back, dimly remembering that you had to give the driver directions before he would set off. She hurled out the words of her address.

With an expression of mild amazement on his face, the cabby put the taxi into motion. Mrs. Maltravers sank back in the darkness and closed her eyes.

She did not seem to have been going for long when she felt the vehicle come to a halt and heard the taximan's cheerful voice.

"Here you are, lady. Not what I'd call a marathon ride, but it's where you asked me to take you."

Mrs. Maltravers opened her eyes.

And there, across the pavement, not three yards away was a dreadfully familiar sight. The two doors close together of the house where her flat had been in those long five years up to her marriage, and, next to it, Miss Potter's door.

And this was wide-open as she had left it only a few minutes ago when she had run out in that terrible mind-numbing panic and had so quickly found the waiting taxi and had blurted out not the address of the house where she had lived with Mr. Maltravers in domestic harmony for the last 15 years, but the address she had known so well before then. No wonder the taximan had looked amazed.

Then, from the top of the rubber-covered stairs, there suddenly appeared a figure, a white jacketed figure, erect and wild-eyed. And flashing in the sunlight, Mrs. Maltravers could distinctly see in the raised right hand the steely sharp, vicious length of a glinting dental probe.

"Q"

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MacLean O'Spelin's first stories—a double entry—appeared in our May 1974 issue. Both were spy stories but they were very different from each other: one dealt with contemporary industrial espionage, the other with the twilight of a spy's career. Mr. O'Spelin's new story presents still another kind of spy, one altogether different from the first two. The new spy is an African Muslim tribesman, Kukazi the Entertainer, a man of a thousand roles, all "rich with subtle twists and devious turns": actor, jester, mimic, teller of legends, weaver of tales." And not the least of his roles—one to test all his skills—is that of a detective, and a subtle and devious detective Kukazi proves to be.

KUKAZI THE ENTERTAINER

by *MacLEAN O'SPELIN*

Kukazi stopped walking when he heard the iron rumble of an *Armee Nationale* half-track several streets away. And because Kontia's capital city was flat and small and, tonight, very dark, he could see the slow-moving reflection of the powerful headlights in the sky. On patrol as his kinsman, Commander of the Army Colonel Ukali, had decreed—"to preserve the peace."

Still, he thought wryly, that ominous rumble had done him a service. It had emptied the streets. It had darkened the lights of people lucky enough to live in houses and extinguished oil lamps and cooking fires in the shambas of the rest. For, even though his role this night in troubled Kontia was age-old, it was best performed in the shadows. *L'espion*—the spy ever-present, never seen.

In the years Kontia had struggled to wrest its freedom from the French, every dark cranny concealed its spy. Even in the centuries-old legends of his tribe spies figured, plying their secret trade in the twilight fringes of each historic event

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Honest spies and lying spies. Clever spies and stupid spies Loyal spies, double-dealing spies. Truly a role to test his skills. For he was Kukazi the Entertainer and he had played many roles, thousands perhaps But seldom one so rich with subtle twists and devious turns. Seldom one so richly rewarding in crisp Kontian banknotes.

The glow in the sky was moving farther away now and the iron rumble had become fainter. He resumed his fluid, distance-eating African pace, the man who called himself Monsieur Petrov was always on time, and he must be, too And it was not a night for a carefree stroll—the President was dead, murdered in his sleep, his youngest wife, too.

Somehow the unknown assassin had escaped through a window of the bedchamber, or so the flics of the *Surete Nationale* theorized as, lizard like, they scurried and scuttled frantically Kukazi spat into the dust—hoping to turn up a suspect.

Officially, the people of Kontia mourned In reality, they waited and watched, frightened, fearful of bloody strife. The President's powerful tribe had sworn vengeance, other tribes, silently jubilant, calculated their next moves For this small barren nation, squeezed between the Sahara to the north and the coastal jungle to the south, the abyss of disaster yawned just ahead.

Kukazi spat again Presidents Politicians Many times he had amused Colonel Ukali with grotesque parodies of these self-servers But the politicians were worse than grotesque. Without them there would be no poverty in the land, no hunger in the countryside, no empty bellies in the village of his birth And he—actor, jester, mimic, teller of legends, weaver of tales would not be creeping through the night trying to be invisible in his dark cloaklike jellabah.

But, in Kontia, a man in position to provide for his family, his village, his tribe, *does* provide He chuckled softly Thanks, ironically, to two foreigners who understood little of Africa, he was in that happy position and his course was clear.

Ahead in the gloom a parked car took shape As he approached it, a door opened in invitation and he hurried to slip into the back seat, where he crouched, uncomfortable but well out of sight. "*Bon soir*, Monsieur Petrov"

The car jolted forward. A bulky positive man, the Russian drove the car as if *he* propelled it, not the engine. "You were

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not followed, Kukazi? Good. You make progress in the tradecraft of espionage. Now, quickly, who has committed these most interesting murders?"

Interesting? Possibly so, as a riddle to be solved. But to Kukazi's mind the abrupt departure of the President from the national scene was good riddance. "Ah, Monsieur Petrov, who knows? The flies run in circles like headless lizards. Rumors fly wildly, like mango bats at dusk."

Petrov grunted and wrenched the car into a turn. "Come, Kukazi. You, the brother of Colonel Ukali, will have facts, not rumors."

Hunched inside his jellabah, Kukazi smiled. He was Ukali's brother, but only in an African sense. True, they were only distant cousins, but their brotherhood sprang from deep, strong tribal roots. So they were, and were not, brothers—a relationship that, luckily for him, was overvalued by foreign agents eager to recruit knowledgeable spies.

Kukazi put a quiver of nervousness in his voice. "Ukali shares no secrets with humble tribal brother."

It was the unsullied truth, but Monsieur Petrov had studied at the Institute of African Affairs in Kharkov and he knew better. "Rank is of no importance between closely related Africans," he recited. "Primitive socialism, instinctive communal interdependence—" But Kukazi had stopped listening; generally the Russian's lecture on Africa lasted all the way to the safehouse.

But distances in the city were short and Petrov soon had to stop talking to negotiate a sharp left turn and a sliding stop. "Wait," he instructed as he climbed out and Kukazi heard his footsteps on the gravel driveway and then the faint clang of the gate being closed. He poked his head up and watched Petrov walk heavily to the small house and fumble with keys at the door.

As clumsy as a Cape buffalo in a swamp, thought Kukazi, but he had to admit that this modest house in its walled compound made a beautifully private safehouse. And he cherished privacy. He had covered himself with his kinsman, Ukali, but with no one else and even innocent associations with foreigners raised eyebrows and questions in Kontia.

Petrov motioned and Kukazi joined him in the small, sparsely furnished front room. With a show of meekness he took the hard wooden chair the Russian pointed to and, without much

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hope, arranged his mobile features into a thirsty expression.

Predictably, Petrov took no notice. His attention firmly on the job at hand, he sat down to face Kukazi across the bare table. "Facts," he began, "are essential. Policy decisions hinge on my report of tonight."

The symmetrical tribal scars on Kukazi's dark face, ritually incised at puberty, arched upward as he registered polite understanding. He leaned forward to show that he, too, was all business. He would have enjoyed a hospitable glass of vodka but, sadly, that was not to be.

Square sallow face stiff with concentration, the Russian agent enunciated his headquarters' demands. Moscow knew, of course, that Ukali had named himself Acting President "to preserve the peace." Excellent. But the key to an analysis of the situation was the unknown assassin. Whose orders had he been carrying out? If caught, would he be tried? Or summarily shot? Or be permitted to disappear, richly paid?

"Old women in the marketplace whisper of *un crime passionel.*"

"No," said Petrov flatly. "Such crimes, in Africa, are political. The President had three other wives. He was no boy in love. The fourth wife was stabbed simply to prevent her from crying out."

It was time for a diversion and Kukazi emptied his face of thought. He rolled his eyes vacantly. He fidgeted, shuffled his dusty sandals. Finally he offered what he knew the Russian did not want to hear; "The President could afford what all African Muslims dream of—four wives. The dead girl, his latest choice, was beautiful. And half his age. Did not, somewhere, a young handsome lover brood sullenly, savagely?"

"I see." Pale eyes knowing, Petrov reached for his wallet. "You intend to badger me with a fable of murderous jealousy." He counted out several bills.

Kukazi ignored them. Petrov contorted his heavy features into a friendly grimace, counted out more bills. "There. I have understood you, yes? Now, was the crime committed on Colonel Ukali's orders? Or was it plotted by the opposition party?"

Rolling his eyes again, Kukazi squirmed. He drummed nervously on the table and his scars turned down mournfully. "Monsieur Petrov, there is great danger for me. The lizard-flics crawl everywhere."

The Russian scowled. Then, reluctantly, he added bills to the pile.

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Kukazi cleared his throat. "The opposition party has an action arm."

"Political action!" Petrov leaned back complacently. "I thought so."

"But" Kukazi spread his hands in apology—"even though they are politicians, they are not infants. They knew the President's sleeping quarters were tightly guarded. They would have waited until he was out in the open At a festival At a parade."

Triumphantly Petrov produced notebook and pen. "Then it *was* Ukali."

"No, no!" Kukazi flailed the air. "Do not write my words. It is too dangerous. I implore you Ukali tells me nothing, nothing."

The Russian drew a long breath, blew it out. "You do admit he planned the death of the President?"

Kukazi leaped to his feet. "I must go. You must drive me to the dropoff point immediately. If Ukali's men find me here—" He sliced a finger across his throat.

Deep in Petrov's pale eyes a flame flickered and Kukazi felt a stab of fear. The man was strong and he was angry and they were alone in a place chosen for its isolation.

But hunger had invaded his village He must provide.

He trembled and wrung his hands. "I must go," he cried. "At once."

Petrov flexed his thick fingers, stared at them. Then, with a visible effort, "Yes, I suppose you do run risks." He added five bills to the pile.

Kukazi returned to his chair, his nervousness not completely feigned. The little game had been pushed to its limit he began to whisper dramatically. "Picture the guard at the outside door of the bedchamber. No one could pass him. But who watched *him?*"

Petrov's pen started to move rapidly.

"A tribesman of Ukali's planted in the Presidential Guard is not impossible to imagine, is it, Monsieur Petrov?"

The Russian radiated satisfaction. "Ukali is ambitious. At the proper time he will proclaim himself President. Excellent. Moscow will applaud him for ridding Kontia of a puppet of the French."

"Picture this scene," said Kukazi, rising to stand very straight, like a soldier on guard. Then, darting cautious glances around, he bent to listen at an imaginary door. Satisfied, he inched it open, slipped through, paused to listen again. "Hear how deeply the President sleeps, his arm across his wife's

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warm brown shoulders. See the guard hesitate Then hear him whisper a prayer to his warrior ancestors as he raises high the knife—"

Savagely he plunged his arm down. "Once the President. Once again—the woman, just as she begins to stir. It is over, it is done."

Staring at his clenched fist, Kukazi staggered to the chair, slumped down. Stiffly his fingers opened. The knife clattered silently—to the floor.

For a split second Petrov stared at the spot. Then he nodded briskly. "Quickly recovering his composure, the guard retrieved the knife Then he unbolted the window to mislead the police and quietly resumed his post."

"Your imagination rivals mine, Monsieur Petrov."

But Petrov was staring off into space. Composing his report to Moscow, Kukazi guessed. Well, it was what they wanted to hear and it would warm them in their faraway cold city. He got to his feet, and as he did so, the pile of banknotes vanished.

"Monsieur Petrov," Kukazi said loudly, "this very moment a flic may be demanding that my poor wife tell where I am tonight. She does not know and she will tremble for me and the flic will lose his temper—"

Petrov came to. "You are right. We have finished for tonight."

He was expansive as he drove Kukazi, again hidden in the back seat, to the dropoff point. "You have done well."

Kukazi agreed

"And you have been paid well."

Kukazi grunted noncommittally.

"My report will reach high levels. My superiors will remember our good work, yours and mine."

"If good work is soaring imagination, then perhaps they will."

Petrov laughed. "You are commendably cautious with your words."

"One should tell no more than the truth, Monsieur Petrov."

The Russian laughed again as he slowed the car. Kukazi the Entertainer eased the door open and slipped out.

There in the dust at the side of the road Kukazi danced a happy jig of victory. Funds enough to feed his village for a month! And if his luck held this night, there would be more. Perhaps even enough for a gala feast of celebration. He must try hard.

He stopped dancing and began to walk Why was it, he

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wondered, that the great powers flocked to establish embassies, cultural missions, information libraries in small remote nations? And why should each expensive mission conceal secret agents like Monsieur Petrov? Surely the yearly expenses of just one such spymaster would feed fifty Kontian villages.

He glanced at the sky. The half track still patrolled, and, as Kukazi crossed the silent city, he kept to back streets and narrow lanes. No need to seek trouble with the Army, though he could handle any flic alive.

And so could his wife. He chuckled at the absurd notion of that staunch Kontian woman quailing before a lizard-flic. More likely, she would send him scuttling, a storm of words and a heavy broom beating about his ears.

He was nearing the rendezvous point and he began to peer ahead into the darkness. Yes, there it was, the dim bulk of a waiting car. A door opened in invitation and he hurried to fold himself into the back seat. "*Bon soir*, Monsieur Dupont."

"*Soir*, Kukazi. What a relief to see you. Paris bombards me with cablegrams. Who has slain our ally, the President? Who engineered this foul crime? Was it Ukali? Or the Russians? The Americans, perhaps?"

Kukazi clutched the seat as Dupont, driving with Gallic élan, kept turning his head to throw words over his shoulder. "And from you, *cher ami*, brother and confidant of the ruthless Ukali, we will learn the truth!"

Monsieur Dupont's safehouse had privacy, and a bit more. Comfortable, modish furniture. Walls splashed with pictures and bright Kontian tapestries. In a corner a small bar of golden rattan where the Frenchman, compact and dapper, busied himself with cognac and glasses.

Sinking into a soft chair, Kukazi accepted his drink with sincere gratitude. A little comfort in a safehouse was a pleasant thing.

Dupont sat opposite him and raised his glass in salute. Kukazi began cooperatively, "In the marketplace they whisper of political murder." Then he ducked his head in bashful apology. "But Ukali tells me nothing."

"Enough, friend Kukazi." Smiling wisely, Dupont took out his wallet. "I have reports that you are constantly with your brother, Ukali. One of those simple familial relationships that are so heartwarming to observe. And, so useful, eh, *mon ami*?"

"Your understanding of Af-

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rica goes deep," Kukazi said humbly. "But Ukali's father was a chief. My father was poor—as am I."

Indulgently chuckling, Du pont pushed some bills across the low table between them. "And now you are not so poor. But—a political crime? Oh, please, no. So ennui-making. So usual." He leaned back, closed his eyes. "I can still see the girl as she was. Young, tall the President preferred tall women slender yet deliciously rounded. Enormous eyes, skin like *creme de chocolat* Politics? Not this time." He opened his sharp brown eyes. "A jealous lover? *Un crime passionel?*"

Suddenly Kukazi's body seemed to shrink, to quake under the jellabah. "I fear for my life," he quavered. "Danger lurks everywhere—"

Instantly the French agent produced the wallet again. "Fear can be conquered." He added bills to the pile. "*Alors*,—smoldering jealousy erupting—a rejected lover, driven insane by desire. Don't you agree?"

Kukazi straightened up. He pursed his lips, ran a reflective finger along his nose. "In my mind's eye I see a different picture. A sad crime. But a simple one." He lowered his gaze in sadness. "No wife supplanted in her husband's bed by another woman accepts such a hurt passively. And if that man is a president, she is transformed into a wounded lioness, brooding, watching with burning cat-eyes from the shadows."

Rising, he narrowed his own eyes to glittering slits. His body flowing like a great cat's, he glided along an imaginary passage "The murderer crept in stealth from the inner chambers no one could pass the outside guard Who else but one of the other wives? Who else could steal softly, softly, to the inside door of the bedchamber?"

Kukazi listened at an imaginary door, inched it open, slipped through. Then a lightning rush, an explosion of pent fury as the knife flashed, flashed again. A moment of horror, instantly overcome. The misleading window unbolted, then the swift soundless retreat through the inner door.

He stood up straight, smiled. "*Voila.*"

"Bravo!" Dupont jumped to his feet, clapping his hands. "Bravissimo. Now, quickly, which of the other three wives was it?"

Returning to his chair, Kukazi picked up his glass, sipped delicately, sipped again. He shrugged. "Imagination is shy, monsieur. *Farouche.* Like a

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frightened sunbird, mine has flown who knows where?"

Dupont lost his aplomb "*Merde!*"

Kukazi thrust out his lower lip like a petulant child Dupont glared. Kukazi maintained his sulky silence Dupont cursed again, and, then, with a sigh of resignation, added again to the pile of banknotes.

"The sunbird dazzles us with his flashing return," said Kukazi, smiling whitely. "And sings to us of the first wife The woman who shared the difficult days before the presidency was dreamed of. The simple days when—in his simple way, monsieur—an African selects a wife not for beauty but for strength and health for she must do an African woman's work."

"Of course," exclaimed Dupont. "The first wife *is* tall and strong and quite plain. Poor creature, supplanted not once but three times. Imagine the fury of a woman *thrice* scorned."

"I can," said Kukazi. "But, alas, imagination cannot supply facts."

Dupont laughed "Understood. You know nothing. Commendable caution. Still, in one way or another, I now find myself able to report that the crime was one of passion, *not* a machination of the ferocious Ukali. Ah, Paris will approve The thought of Ukali as President chilled them to the marrow."

Two great cities warmed in one night! Kukazi hid a grin. Strange people, these foreign agents. Tell them truthfully that you know nothing and they think you know all Tickle their imaginations and they conjure up solutions to unsolved crimes.

But not bad fellows, really Kukazi drank the last of his cognac and as he got to his feet, the pile of banknotes vanished

It was well past midnight when he neared the squat building that housed Ukali's headquarters. Unlike the rest of the dark and waiting city it blazed with light. Outside its high fence, troops waited in tense clusters around armored personnel carriers, ready for a call to action. Others patrolled the perimeter, rifles at the ready.

Nodding to the many he knew, Kukazi went directly to the gate. A guard he did not recognize barred the way with his rifle, and Kukazi said, "I am Kukazi the Entertainer. You will know the name."

The guard came close, looked into his face. Then he stepped back respectfully. "I know the name You are of our

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tribe. Pass, my brother."

Inside the building Kukazi threaded his way through a confusion of shouting staff officers and junior aides hurrying up and down the halls. He found Ukali alone in his office, standing before a wall map of Kontia. Despite the hour, the tall thick-muscled Acting President was still in full military uniform. He glanced over his shoulder.

"Welcome, brother Kukazi." Ukali strode to the door, kicked it shut. "The hubbub of a headquarters unsure of what will happen next," he said. "It begins to weary me." He pointed at the map. "Tribal rivalries smolder everywhere. What *will* come next, my cousin? The all-consuming blaze?"

"Your position is difficult—"

Ukali held up a big hand to silence him and, yawning hugely, sank into a chair. "Entertain me, make me laugh. To laugh is to feel a refreshing breeze in the heat of midday. So spin me the comic tales you have already spun for your strange foreign friends this night."

Kukazi obliged with gusto, for he was Kukazi the Entertainer. He played himself and he played the two foreign agents and he played the two imaginary murderers. It was a strenuous, artful performance and he enjoyed himself enormously and Ukali's laugh boomed often. And when he finished by flourishing the thick wad of money aloft in triumph, Ukali laughed again with rich relish. "A private foreign-aid program for your village. Brilliant! You waste your talents. You should be our Foreign Minister."

Then, gradually, his face hardened. "Your playacting suggests two equally possible solutions to the crime that baffles our hapless *Surete*. Tell me, my clever cousin, which solution do you prefer?"

Kukazi hesitated. Then, tumbling out the words as if to be rid of them, "You are Kontia's finest soldier, a man of action. You have never shirked cleansing our nation of evil. And some say you do not lack for high personal ambition."

"Of which Moscow approves, you tell me. While Paris approves my *lack* of ambition." His expression grew savage. "No one makes Ukali dance on a string. Ukali is his own man."

"Kontia's man, my brother." Again Kukazi hesitated. Then, "In truth, the step from Acting President to President is short."

"And my legs are long, eh, foolish cousin?"

"You detested the puppet President as an evil, an obstacle

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in the way of a brighter future for our nation. Who knows what you may have planned—happily, you tell me nothing—but this much I do know: you did not insert an assassin in the Presidential Guard."

"Aha. Did I not?"

"No. You would have trusted no one but a tribal brother to carry out such a delicate mission."

"Correctly reasoned. Continue."

Kukazi touched his own face, then indicated the scars on Ukali's cheekbones. "The marks of our tribal allegiance are indelible. And as the hyena fears the lion, the President feared you. No man whose face bore your tribe's proud insignia could have served in the Presidential Guard." He grinned brashly. "You are innocent."

Ukali eyed him balefully. Then his face began to clear and abruptly he smacked a thick palm against his thigh. "Of course, the first wife!" He rose quickly and started for the door.

"Wait," cried Kukazi. "Wait There is a third solution."

Angrily Ukali wheeled toward him. "Do not play the fool. The entertainment is over."

"Agreed, my Colonel. But consider. The dead girl was young and beautiful. But shrewd, also, and guileful how else ensnare a President? She would know the other wives were her enemies and she would have barred that inner door against their intrusions."

Ukali shook his head vigorously, as if to clear it. "You mean the *Surete* is right? The assassin miraculously scaled walls, eluded keen-eyed guards, opened a window bolted on the inside—"

"No. The *Surete* is, as ever, blind."

"Who, then? You have eliminated everyone."

"No. There remains the young handsome lover who, somewhere, brooded savagely."

"Nonsense. You yourself eliminated him. No one could pass the guard."

"He did not need to."

Ukali's eyes burned with menace. "I weary of your riddles."

"No riddle, my brother. The *somewhere* the young lover brooded was just outside that door."

"Kinsman or no, I warn you."

Hastily Kukazi said, "The lover *was* the guard."

Ukali's face went momentarily blank. Then, "Oho! Yes, my wily brother. Presidential Guards are chosen because they are tall, strong, fine-looking. Perhaps they were lovers before

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the marriage, perhaps after—it matters not, for that post, of all posts, would drive a man mad with jealousy."

"And *that* door would not have been barred. The President would have permitted no one, not even a wife, to lock him away from outside help."

Ukali turned and strode out, shouting for his aides. Feeling suddenly weak, Kukazi dropped into a chair. It was turning into a long night.

Grateful for the respite, he half dozed and let his mind wander to the feast he would soon provide the villagers. There would be mountains of manioc and millet and matoke. And four or five fat sheep and dozens of chicks to roast over pits of red coals for a succulent mechoui. . .

He snapped awake when, just after dawn, Ukali returned. "He confessed." Ukali smiled grimly. "Reluctantly. But in the end we persuaded him to tell all. And to surrender the knife."

His strong black face grew thoughtful. "In a few hours there will be a press conference. The confession will be read to the nation and the world will learn that it was *un crime passionel.* Your Frenchman's report will have been correct in essence, if not in detail—Paris will be pleased with a simple crime of passion."

Kukazi nodded. "But my Russian will be disappointed. Still, he and Moscow will continue to believe that the guard actually acted on your orders."

"True. But even though you told them no lies, they will not be so generous with you in the future."

Kukazi shrugged. "Who knows what may be done? One hears that the Americans have fat purses. The Red Chinese, too."

Ukali studied him carefully. "You have saved the lizard-flics from committing further stupidities. And because tribe will not attack tribe over a crime of jealousy, you have pulled Kontia back from the edge of disaster."

"I am glad, my Colonel." Weariness gone, he leaped up to caricature a heroic pose. "Behold Kukazi, Savior of Flics."

Ukali ignored the playacting. "Unwittingly the young guard served our nation well. Perhaps in a year or so he can be permitted to escape."

"A generous thought, my President."

"As always, your mind leaps like a juba dancer. Whether I plan to be President remains my secret, impudent cousin. But my plans for you—"

"Plans for me?" Kukazi's surprise was real.

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"Your wiles, your skill at insinuating thoughts into the minds of others do these serve Kontia?" His eyes bored into Kukazi's. "They do not. Kukazi the Entertainer is dead."

"Dead?" Kukazi groped for his chair. "Dead, my brother?"

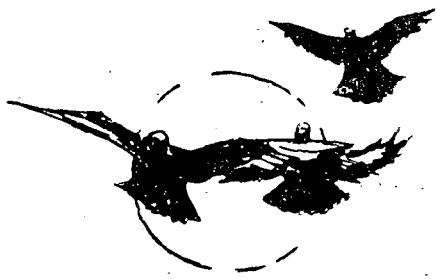
Throwing back his head, Ukali laughed fiercely. "A jest for the jester. Enter the new Chief of Flics. Long live Kukazi the Lizard!"

Kukazi's heart froze. He, a lizard-flic? Impossible! Never!

"I, Acting President Ukali, decree that Kukazi's shrewd brain and leaping imagination and, yes, even his strange compulsion to tell the truth, are henceforward to serve Kontia."

Kukazi eyed him mournfully. Serve Kontia? What an idea. But still, a new idea, possibly even a useful one. And certainly a new role to master. A role with twists and turns to test his skills, all his skills.

And as head of Kontia's *Surete*, oh, what fine and fanciful tales he could spin for his foreign friends, old and new. For had he not finally discovered his ultimate role? The role that pleased him most, that warmed his spirit most. Was he not, above all else, Kukazi the Provider?



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a *NEW* Interpol story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Edward D Hoch's five long running series for EQMM are remarkably different in appeal and category. The Nick Velvet stories concern a unique felon who, for a minimum fee of $20,000, steals only the worthless no jewels, gold, objets d'art –and has to be a topnotch 'tec in order to be a topnotch thief Rand is a code and cipher expert and counterspy Captain Leopold is a straightforward procedural cop who has a knack for solving baffling, sometimes "impossible" cases. Ulysses S Byrd is a con man with a gift for spotting gulls and devising nets to trap them Sebastian Blue and his associate Laura Charme, who work for Interpol, the International Criminal Police Organization, investigate airline crimes, especially when they are bizarre

And this newest Interpol story is bizarre indeed about an ancient method of murder in a modern setting

INTERPOL: The Case of the Lapidated Man

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The man's name was Romeo Hyde—or at least that was the name which appeared on television screens throughout England each week at the beginning of The Thriller Hour. Once an actor, he was now the highly respected producer of one of the most popular televised entertainments of recent years.

Seeing him, especially against a backdrop of the North Tiverton slag heap, one did not think instantly of acting nor television or the theater. He might have been a country squire or a mine owner,

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climbing over the rocks for a better view of his holdings. At first glance he seemed alone on the slag heap, a graying man of uncertain middle age, carrying a furled umbrella which he used as a walking stick to guide him over the rough spots.

The sky was leaden with the threat of rain, and an occasional gust of wind blew at the flaps of his coat. Somewhere behind him a rock was dislodged, and he turned quickly at the sound. He saw them then, a line of figures silhouetted against the gray of the sky. They had materialized all at once over the edge of the hill, and now they formed a rough semicircle in front of him. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but then the first rock struck him on the shoulder.

Romeo Hyde turned to run, perhaps realizing it was already too late, as more rocks pelted down on him. A single smooth stone struck him on the forehead, and then another hit his temple. He staggered and went down as the stones kept coming with deadly accuracy.

After a time, when the man on the ground no longer moved, the stoning ceased. The line of figures drew back, slowly, and vanished over the hill the way they had come.

The rain which had threatened all morning began to fall, covering the hillside with a misty curtain.

Sebastian Blue was quite pleased with himself. After little more than a year with Interpol, he'd just learned that his special field of investigation, airline crime, had been designated as a new Group H in the International Police Coordinating Division. Sitting in the Secretary General's office on the top floor of Interpol headquarters in Saint-Cloud, outside Paris, Sebastian surveyed the framed photographs and mementos that covered the walls and reflected once more on the vagaries of life. It was personal tragedy, a broken marriage, that had caused him to leave Scotland Yard and seek employment with Interpol. At his age, nearing 50, it could have deepened the tragedy. Instead it had opened up a whole new life, a new career.

"So you see," the Secretary General was saying, "national attitude toward airline crime is changing. You might remember it was not too many years ago when Interpol could not even act in cases of airliner hijacking, because of the political implications in many instances. Today the nations of the world—those that belong to the International Criminal Police Organization—realize that we can serve their

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national interests while still remaining aloof from politics. The terrorist who hijacks an airliner or mails a letter-bomb is no politician. He is a criminal, and must be treated as such."

"How much of a staff will I have in Group H?" Sebastian asked, anxious to get on with the business at hand.

"I am assigning Laura Charme to work with you, since she has assisted you many times in the past. Our budget is limited, but we will give you what help we can." He motioned toward the organization chart for the Coordinating Division which hung on one wall. Until yesterday there had been only seven groups—now there were eight:

Group A—Files

Group B—Fingerprint Identification

Group C—Murder and Theft, Missing Persons

Group D—Bank Fraud, Smuggling

Group E—Drugs, Morals Offenses, Traffic in Women

Group F—Counterfeiting

Group G—Economic and Financial Crimes

Group H—Airline Crimes

"Naturally your work will overlap the activities of other groups," the Secretary General continued. "A crime like gold smuggling, for example, could involve Group D, Group G, and your group. If the gold is used in payment for narcotics, Group E would also be interested."

"I understand."

"You look pleased, Sebastian. But perhaps the news today is not all good. How would you like to return to England?"

"What?"

"A man named Romeo Hyde has been murdered there. He was a television producer of some renown. The Thriller Hour was his creation, I believe."

"And he's been killed?"

The Secretary General nodded. "They found his body yesterday. He'd been lapidated—stoned to death."

Sebastian Blue grunted. "A ritual killing? Something Biblical?"

"We don't know. He was in the north of England, scouting locations for the television series, when it happened. I want you to go there."

"How does Romeo Hyde's death concern Group H?"

"In a most peculiar manner. The Thriller Hour did a television show in England a few weeks ago concerning the crash of an airliner. The script caused quite a lot of interest among law-enforcement agencies. His killing may be linked to that script, and to a number

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of recent plane crashes on international routes. This dossier contains the information you need, plus a copy of the script in question."

"I'll fly to London tomorrow," Sebastian said.

"Take Miss Charme with you. She may be of some use around those television people. And Sebastian—"

"Yes, sir?"

"When you get back to England, remember—it's not Scotland Yard any longer. You have no powers of arrest with Interpol. Your assignment is simply to gather and supply information."

"I understand," Sebastian Blue said.

It was Laura Charme's first visit to London in years, and she was delighted with the city at its midsummer best. "You never told me it could be this lovely, Sebastian," she said as they strolled along Bishops Bridge Road toward the building where Romeo Hyde's studios were located. "Every time I've been here before it's been rainy and cold, even in July."

"You must have hit it bad, though I'll grant you this is something of a heat wave for London. The temperature rarely climbs above eighty."

"Did you live near here when you were married?"

"No, no, quite far away, really."

"Do you want to go see her—your ex-wife?"

Sebastian snorted. "Not likely. She's married again, and I suppose she's happy. It happens all the time, these days."

"I was glad to hear about Group H. You deserve that."

"We'll see how much I deserve it after this case. The Secretary General warned me not to behave as if I were still with Scotland Yard, but I must admit I have the feeling already. It's like the old days, being back here."

They went up in the elevator to the offices of Hyde Productions, Ltd., and soon found themselves in the office of the vice president, a nervous little man named Thomas Piggett. "We're still quite confused around here," he told Sebastian. "Forgive me if I have to answer a few telephone calls while we talk. The network is anxious to know about future shows, and there has been a deal pending in the United States."

"Go right ahead," Sebastian said. "But perhaps between calls you can fill me in on a bit of the background. Interpol is especially interested in The Thrill Hour episode of a few weeks back—A Sky To Plunder

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was the title, I believe."

"Yes, yes, the one about the airliner crashes. It attracted a good deal of mail."

"Correct me if I'm wrong. Naturally I didn't see the episode in Paris, but in reading the script it seems to me that it was built around a method of poisoning the pilot and copilot with cyanide. The author's gimmick seems to have been that cyanide is often present in the bloodstreams of plane-crash victims because they inhale toxic fumes from burning seat cushions before they die."

Thomas Piggett nodded. "Polyurethane and polystyrene foams give off cyanide gas when burned. It was a pretty good gimmick for the show, actually. The cyanide in the pilot's bloodstream was never questioned because of this known effect of the burning foam. Thus the sabotage of the planes wasn't immediately detected."

"The author's name is given as J. J. Cromwell, with an address of a post-office box in North Tiverton. Mr. Hyde was murdered there, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Piggett said shortly, reaching to answer a ringing telephone. He talked for a few minutes to someone at the network, then hung up. "Yes, North Tiverton. Mr. Hyde told me he was driving up there to scout for locations."

"And to visit J. J. Cromwell?"

"I don't know about that."

"Have you met Cromwell?"

"No. Mr. Hyde dealt with him directly. I don't believe any of us ever met him. Or her."

"Her?"

Piggett smiled. "Women writers sometimes use initials to disguise the fact of their sex."

"Surely not in this era of women's liberation!" Laura said, joining the conversation for the first time.

The nervous little man shifted his gaze toward her. "We are quite aware of the position of women. If you had ever viewed our show, you would know that one of the leading roles is played by a highly liberated young woman. But come, let me show you the sound stage. We're shooting some interiors today for a future episode."

"In the middle of summer?"

"We must get an early jump on fall. Follow me."

Sebastian and Laura tagged along, though he had the feeling the tour of the sound stage was merely an excuse for getting them off the subject of J. J. Cromwell's identity. They descended to the first floor and entered a soundproofed door to find themselves in a high-ceilinged barn of a place strung with cables and wires and

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hanging flats of scenery. Sebastian avoided a moving microphone boom and found himself face to face with a gorgeous redhead in a black leather jumpsuit.

"Hello there," he said.

Piggett stepped between them. "This is our star, Dusty Summers. Dusty, I want you to meet Sebastian Blue and Laura Charme, from Interpol in Paris. They're investigating Romeo's murder."

"Not exactly the murder," Sebastian started to correct him, but Piggett hurried on, disregarding him.

"Dusty worked very closely with Mr. Hyde."

The redhead seemed to welcome the break in the filming routine. "His death is a great tragedy," she said, shaking her head sadly. "I hope you get the ones who did it."

"Is this your costume for the show?" Laura asked, examining the leather jumpsuit.

"For this episode. The Thriller Hour goes in for hand-to-hand combat a great deal—like The Avengers some years back, or Kung Fu on American television. I have to use karate and judo."

Sebastian saw that Laura was interested. "I'm into that myself. Are you any good?" she asked.

The redhead laughed. "Not really. It's all show business. We fake it pretty well."

"We're especially interested in a show you did a few weeks ago—about the airliner crashes."

"That was the last of the season. We filmed it months ago." She gestured toward the camera dolly. "Now we're starting next season."

"Do you know the author of that episode, J. J. Cromwell?"

"Hardly. We discourage authors on the sets as much as possible. They always want to make changes—or else they don't like the changes we make."

"He lives in North Tiverton, where Romeo Hyde was killed."

"Fancy that. Maybe he didn't like the show."

"Did you receive any personal mail about the show, Miss Summers?" Laura asked.

"Dear, I get personal mail after *every* show! You wouldn't believe some of the letters. They see me in this leather suit or some of my other costumes and it gives them all sorts of kinky ideas."

"We're shooting, Dusty," the director called to her.

"All right! Pardon me now. I have to go deliver a few judo chops in this next scene."

"Karate chops," Laura corrected sweetly.

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"What?"

"Karate chops. There's no such thing as a judo chop."

"Sure, if you say so."

They watched her run through the scene, disposing of two cooperative stunt men who took their falls well. "I could do better than that," Laura scoffed. On the way back upstairs she asked, "Do you think Dusty Summers is her real name?"

"In show business hardly anyone uses his or her real name. I imagine some press agent thought it up for her. For that matter, can you imagine anyone named Romeo Hyde? That's from his acting days."

Back in Piggett's office they heard more details of the production company. "It was Mr. Hyde's creation from the beginning," Piggett told them. "He furnished the money, hired the actors, bought the scripts. Despite its popularity, the show was beginning to sag lately. He was worried about its future."

"You said he was scouting locations when he was killed."

"*He* said so. In truth, he drove up to North Tiverton every weekend to relax and get away from business."

"Then he was known to the townspeople?"

"Oh, yes, quite well, I'd imagine."

"Might they have caused his death?"

"For what reason? Romeo Hyde always seemed quite a likable chap to me."

Sebastian flipped over the pages of his little notebook. "I should talk to Scotland Yard about the case. As I understand it, they were already in contact with Hyde about the content of that Thriller episode before he was killed."

"That's right. An Inspector was in to see him only last week."

"Could the Yard's interest in the show have led to his drive up to North Tiverton? Perhaps to see the author, this J. J. Cromwell?"

"Possibly," Piggett replied through reluctant lips. He didn't like to talk about it. "But as I said, he went every weekend."

"You'd better give me this Inspector's name so I can contact him."

"Certainly. Inspector Claude Jennings."

Sebastian didn't bother to write it down.

On the way back to the hotel Laura said, "Sebastian, your face went absolutely white when he gave you that Scotland Yard man's name. Do you know him?"

He stared out the taxi window at the passing street

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scene. He kept staring out for a long time before he answered her question. "I used to work with Jennings. He's the man who married my ex-wife."

In the morning he visited the building on Victoria Embankment that housed New Scotland Yard. He went alone because he did not want Laura to see him with Claude Jennings. Even after all this time he wasn't certain what his own reactions would be.

Jennings was a handsome, preoccupied man who seemed never to notice women. He'd been a good friend of Sebastian's for many years, and it was partly this memory of friendship that forced Sebastian to leave his job—and his country—when Elizabeth divorced him to marry Claude.

"How are you, old man?" Claude greeted him now, coming to the door to shake his hand.

Sebastian, who was only three years older than Jennings, replied coolly, "I've been fine."

"We hear great things about your work with Interpol. It's a whole new career for you. Got you out of this rut, anyway."

Sebastian grunted and sat down. Jennings had changed little, but his office was larger and it was obvious he was doing well at the Yard. "You seem to be flourishing in the same rut."

"You know me, Sebastian. I was always a plodder."

"How is Elizabeth these days?"

Jennings shifted his eyes. "Very well, thanks. If you're going to be in town long perhaps we could have you out to dinner."

"I'll be leaving this afternoon," Sebastian said, and saw the obvious relief on the other's face. "At least I will be if you can give me some information on this Romeo Hyde business."

"Certainly, certainly!" He shifted some files on his desk. "Bizarre sort of crime, don't you think? People don't get themselves stoned to death these days."

"Hyde managed it, somehow. I understand you were already investigating the television series before the murder occurred."

"Just one episode, really—A Sky To Plunder. You know, since you left I've been doing some of your old work out at Heathrow. A plane crashed near there a few months back, just about the time they were filming this Thriller episode. The pilot had cyanide in his bloodstream."

"As I understand it that's not unusual, especially if the plane burns and the victim inhales toxic fumes."

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"Exactly. Which makes cyanide a perfect airborne murder weapon. Fortunately, if the coroner knows what he's looking for, he can determine whether the cyanide entered the bloodstream through the stomach or lungs by studying the residue in both places. It was too late to do this in the Heathrow crash, because the pilot's body was cremated after the initial autopsy. But we found other evidence."

"What, precisely?"

"Potassium cyanide mixed with the sugar in the little packets for the pilot's coffee—exactly as in The Thriller Hour episode. When we checked some unburned packets recovered from the plane's cabin, we found poison in one of them."

"You checked this after the television drama was aired?"

Jennings nodded. "Just last week, as a matter of fact. And there'd been nothing in the press until that time hinting at sabotage." He consulted his notes. "The crash was on March 28th, two weeks before that episode was filmed."

"Coincidence?" Sebastian asked. "Stranger things have happened."

But Claude Jennings shook his head. "The details were too similar. No, this Cromwell chap had to have inside knowledge to write that script."

"Any luck tracing Cromwell?"

"None. A post-office box in North Tiverton. And now Hyde's been killed there. But what's Interpol's interest in all this?"

"There have been other crashes," Sebastian replied. "Probably no connection, but we wanted to check."

"There's something else," Jennings said, his voice a bit hesitant. "Romeo Hyde received special permission to inspect the plane's wreckage."

"When was that?"

"Just before they started filming. He said he wanted to shoot a scene of the show in the hangar where they were assembling the bits and pieces. He looked it all over, but decided against filming there."

"Isn't that proof the crash inspired the script, rather than the other way around?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But the script was written and accepted prior to the March 28th crash."

Sebastian Blue grunted. "I believe a visit to North Tiverton is indicated."

"Wish I could go with you. If you need any help up there, just let me know."

"Certainly." Sebastian got to his feet. He couldn't quite bring himself to shake hands again. "Give my best to Elizabeth."

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"I will, old man. Good to see you again."

Laura Charme was waiting for him back at the hotel overlooking Green Park. "How did it go, Sebastian?"

"All right. He was always a gentleman, if nothing else. He invited me to dinner."

"You're not going?"

"No." He smiled at her concern. They'd become very close these past months, even though she was young enough to be his daughter. "But I've got to crack this case, Laura, because Jennings thinks I can't."

"Which case? He's interested in Hyde's murder, and we're interested in the plane crash. Maybe they're not even connected."

"We'll see," Sebastian said.

He rented a car and drove up to North Tiverton that afternoon, leaving Laura in London to check further on the cast of The Thriller Hour. The town was about 100 miles to the north, in an area still considered good farming country. Even the coal mines had not completely spoiled the pastoral beauty of the land, or the simple ways of the people.

A few of them, standing at the crossroads, eyed him with natural suspicion as he drove into town. For a moment, remembering the stoning of Romeo Hyde, he wished he'd worn his pistol. But this was England, and though he was no longer a part of Scotland Yard he honored their custom of going about unarmed.

"Welcome to North Tiverton!" a voice said as he left the car in front of a little white church near the center of town. Sebastian saw a young Anglican priest in street clothes coming to greet him.

"Thank you, Reverend. It seems a friendly town."

"No more than a village really. I'm Dr. Crouthers, the pastor."

"Sebastian Blue. I'm with Interpol."

The priest smiled. "Since the tragedy everyone who comes here is either police or press." He studied Sebastian's face. "I suppose you'll want to see the hill where it happened."

"Later. Just now I want to talk to you."

"Why me? Our constable could tell you more."

"Isn't there something Biblical about a man being stoned to death? It's not the usual Twentieth Century crime, certainly."

Dr. Crouthers shrugged. "A gang killing, perhaps. The rural areas have their youth gangs just like the cities."

"A youth gang would more

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likely use knives or razors."

"The method of murder interests you?"

"It interests me because it is ancient, and the case I'm working on—involving airline sabotage—is quite modern. The two don't go together."

"Must they?"

"If they don't, then why was Romeo Hyde killed?"

Dr. Crouthers sighed. "I'm a young man, maybe too young for the people of North Tiverton. They don't always listen to me. Come on, we'll drive out to the hill and I'll show you where it happened."

Laura Charme was waiting for Thomas Piggett when he left the Hyde Productions building for a late lunch hour. The little man seemed startled to see her again, and his nervous mannerisms returned at once. "Miss Charme, isn't it? Do you have more questions?"

"I do," Laura said, falling into step beside him. "We didn't really meet the rest of the cast yesterday."

"It changes each week. Dusty Summers is the only continuing character this season."

"I understand the script of A Sky To Plunder was purchased before that March 28th plane crash. How many people would have seen it before that date?"

"Oh, any number—we have casting and set design and a great deal of preparation before filming begins."

"Mr. Hyde purchased the script himself?"

"Yes."

"Have you used anything else by the mysterious J. J. Cromwell?"

"Yes, two or three. I could check for you."

Laura smiled. "Perhaps I'll come by your office later."

"You're welcome any time."

But after they had parted, Laura knew she wouldn't wait till later. She wanted a look at the files of Hyde Productions, and the lunch hour seemed the best time to do it. The office was open when she returned to it, with only a single secretary working in the outer room. She waited until the girl's back was turned, then made her way quickly to Piggett's empty office. The filing cabinets she had observed earlier were unlocked, with several thick folders containing each of last season's shows.

The files for A Sky To Plunder were in the back, and she pulled out the script. The author's name on the first page was Julie J. Cromwell. Piggett had lied about not knowing whether it was a man or a woman, and she wondered why. Flipping through the pages, she

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saw the interleaved blue and pink sheets that showed revisions had been made. Many revisions.

And most of them were on pages detailing the plane crash and its aftermath.

"Well," a voice said behind her, "it's the girl who never heard of a judo chop!"

She whirled, facing Dusty Summers. The actress still wore her leather jumpsuit, and she crouched slightly as she moved toward Laura. "I was—" Laura began.

"I know what you were doing—snooping!"

Her right hand shot out. Laura turned just in time as the hard edge hit her shoulder instead of her throat. She felt the stab of pain and reacted, catching Dusty's arm before the redhead could get clear. The actress screamed in pain as Laura toppled her to the floor.

"*This* is judo," Laura told her. "Now suppose you start talking. Tell me about Julie Cromwell."

"What about her?" Dusty gasped from the floor.

"Why the big secret about who wrote that script? What's going on in North Tiverton?"

"I don't know."

"Sebastian Blue has gone there this afternoon. He'll find out the truth anyway."

There was something like fright in Dusty's eyes. "They don't like outsiders. They'll kill him too, just as they killed Romeo."

"Who? Did Julie Cromwell cause his death?"

But the redhead had started to sob. Laura wondered what she could do, how she could help Sebastian. Finally she reached for the telephone.

Dr. Crouthers pointed up the hill toward an old slag heap now overgrown with weeds. "This is where it happened," he told Sebastian. "They found him at the bottom of this hill."

"Who found him?"

"The village constable. Someone called him."

Sebastian strolled up a short distance and stooped to pick up a smooth round stone. "You know who killed him, don't you, Reverend?"

Dr. Crouthers sighed. "North Tiverton is a very old village, untouched by city ways. As I said, perhaps I am too young myself to reach these people."

"I saw television antennas on some houses. It's not old enough that they don't watch The Thriller Hour. In fact, one of the script writers lives here—J. J. Cromwell."

"Yes," Dr. Crouthers answered. "Julie Cromwell."

"A woman? Could you take me to her?"

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"She no longer lives in North Tiverton."

"But you knew her?"

"Yes, I saw her occasionally."

"Did Romeo Hyde come here to visit her?"

"He came every weekend, I think."

"Could you show me where she lived?"

Dr. Crouthers gazed at him. "Would that do any good?"

"Yes, I believe it would."

He brushed back his sandy hair. "Very well. It's a short drive from here."

They returned to the car and drove about a mile down the road, to a little cottage almost hidden from view by an ancient stand of evergreens. "This is where Julie Cromwell lived?" Sebastian asked.

"Yes, off and on. I believe Mr. Hyde purchased the cottage for her some months back." He spoke the words with obvious reluctance. "I believe she came here occasionally to write."

"And Romeo Hyde came here, too?"

Dr. Crouthers dropped his eyes. "Yes."

"Can we get in?"

"I want no part of an illegal entry."

Sebastian smiled at him. "It's hardly as serious as murder. But you're right, of course. Leave me here for a time by myself. I'll walk back to the village."

The priest's lip tightened. "Be careful. The people hereabouts—"

"I know," Sebastian said, as if an unspoken message had passed between them. He waited until the priest's car had vanished down the road toward the village, then began checking the doors and windows of the little cottage. At the rear he found a door held shut by a simple latch, and it took him only a few moments to open it with a plastic credit card slid between the door and jamb.

The interior of the cottage was dark, with shades drawn against the hazy sunlight. As he moved from one room to the next he become aware of signs of a masculine presence—men's shoes under the bed, standing in mute testimony beside a pair of women's fancy slippers. He moved on to the closet and found more of a mixture—his clothes and hers. A desk drawer yielded a first draft of A Sky To Plunder, written in a firm masculine hand.

But Sebastian was puzzled. If Julie Cromwell had moved away as Dr. Crouthers said, why had she left all these expensive clothes behind?

Something thumped against the cottage roof, interrupting his thoughts. He moved to the

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door and peered out cautiously. There was nothing to see, but then the sound was repeated, as if a rock had landed on the roof. He opened the door wide and stepped out.

He saw the first man at once, stepping from the shelter of the trees across the road. He was dressed in faded pants and shirt, and Sebastian knew he was one of the villagers who'd watched his arrival earlier. Then he saw the second one, off to the side, and the third coming around the cottage. A rock landed in the dirt a few feet away and he reached instinctively for his gun, remembering too late that he wasn't carrying it.

They formed a rough circle around him, the nearest some 50 feet away, and he saw the stones they were carrying. "What do you want?" he asked.

Another man hurled a stone, and Sebastian ducked his head to avoid it. "What are you trying to—?"

"You're a friend of his, aren't you?" the nearest man taunted. "You're one of them!"

A stone from behind hit him on the leg. He turned, dodged another, and lost his balance, falling to the ground. In that moment he realized for the first time that they might kill him.

Then there was the sharp crack of a revolver from somewhere down the road and the men in the circle paused. They looked in the direction of the shot, their faces uncertain, and saw a small car speeding toward them. Sebastian recognized Dr. Crouthers' car—the one that had brought him out here—but now the young priest was not alone. As the car pulled to a stop Laura jumped out, followed by Inspector Claude Jennings waving a snub-nosed .32 revolver.

The circle of men tried to scatter, running back toward the wooded area, but Jennings fired another shot into the air. "Stay where you are!" he shouted. "I'm a police officer!"

"Thank God we arrived in time," Laura gasped. "The priest told us where you were. When Dusty Summers said your life might be in danger, I had to call Jennings. He was the only Scotland Yard man whose name I knew."

"Looks as if I saved your life, old man," Jennings said.

Sebastian gazed at him distastefully. "And since when did Scotland Yard men start carrying guns?"

Jennings looked embarrassed. "Matter of fact, I had to borrow the weapon—from the young lady here."

Sebastian took them through the cottage, showing them what he'd found. Then, as Jennings

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made arrangements with the local constable for the men to be taken into town for further questioning, Laura said, "We had to come, Sebastian, because I discovered you were all wrong about Romeo Hyde. He didn't poison that pilot or sabotage that plane. It was all a publicity stunt!"

"Stunt?" Sebastian protested. "But there was poison in the pilot's sugar!"

"Poison that Hyde placed in a packet and then managed to leave with the remains from the plane's cabin. I thought it odd those packets didn't burn. Remember, Jennings told you Hyde received permission to view the wreckage. If he was really responsible for the crash—or if Julie Cromwell was—he'd have removed that poisoned packet. If Scotland Yard hadn't noticed the similarity of the show to the real crash, I'm certain Hyde would have sent them an anonymous letter pointing it out."

Claude Jennings had joined them now. "All for publicity? That's difficult to believe."

"Not so difficult," Sebastian mused, "when we remember that the show was in trouble. It was Hyde's money behind it, and he needed a burst of publicity to keep the show in the public eye for another season."

Laura nodded. "The original script was written before the crash, but when I inspected it this afternoon I found that many changes were made later—changes involving the accident itself. The original script was doctored by Hyde to duplicate the events of the real tragedy and make it appear that life was imitating art. I think Hyde wrote the script himself and put Julie Cromwell's name on it."

"I'm sure of it," Sebastian said. "I found an early draft in a man's handwriting."

"What sort of man could he have been?" Jennings said.

"The sort that gets himself stoned to death in a remote village," Sebastian replied.

The Scotland Yard man blinked. "By these fellows? The townspeople? But why?"

Sebastian turned to Dr. Crouthers. "I think you can answer that."

"I—" He seemed at a loss for words. "I'd rather not."

"Hyde purchased this cottage some months back," Sebastian said. "He drove up here on weekends to relax and write. I suppose Dusty Summers knew about it, as did others on the show. But it wasn't the sort of thing one spoke of, even after he was dead. You see, these simple village people would have none

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of it. After a time they took the law of God into their own hands. They imposed an ancient punishment for what they considered an ancient evil."

"I tried to reason with them," Dr. Crouthers said, his voice bleak with despair.

"I still don't understand," Jennings said. "Are you saying the people killed him because he loved this Julie Cromwell?"

"No, no," Sebastian grumbled. "You still don't see it, do you, Claude? Even after I've shown you the clothes and the shoes? She wouldn't have left them if she'd moved away. Julie was Juliet, to his Romeo. And perhaps her middle initial stood for Jekyll to his Hyde. He wasn't killed because he came here on weekends to love Julie Cromwell. He was killed because he came here to *be* Julie Cromwell!"

"Q"

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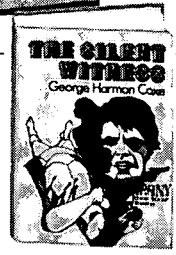

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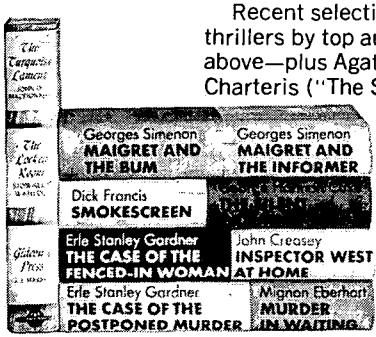

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